

COLLECTED STORIES

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*

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IN MY GOOD BOOKS

COLLECTED STORIES

By

V. S. Pritchett

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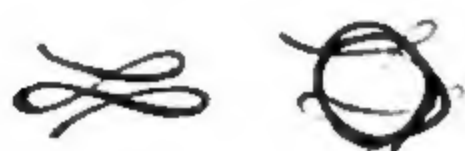
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TO MY WIFE

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The Sailor

HE was lifting his knees high and putting his hand up, when I first saw him, as if, crossing the road through that stringing rain, he were breaking through the bead curtain of a Pernambuco bar. I knew he was going to stop me. This part of the Euston Road is a beat of the men who want a cup of tea or their fare to a job in Luton or some outlying town.

"Beg pardon, chum," he said in an anxious hot-potato voice. "Is that Whitechapel?"

He pointed to the traffic clogged in the rain farther down where the electric signs were printing off the advertisements and daubing them on the wet road. Coatless, with a smudged trilby hat on the back of his head so that a curl of boot-polish black hair glistened with raindrops over his forehead, he stood there squeezing the water in his boots and looking at me, from his bilious eyes, like a man drowning and screaming for help in two feet of water and wondering why the crowd is laughing.

"That's St Pancras," I said.

"Oh, Gawd," he said, putting his hand to his jaw like a man with toothache. "I'm all messed up." And he moved on at once, gaping at the lights ahead.

"Here, wait," I said. "Which part of Whitechapel do you want? Where have you come from?"

"Surrey Docks," he said. "They said it was near Surrey Docks, see, but they put me wrong. I bin on the road since ten this morning."

"Acton," he read a bus sign aloud, recalling the bottom of the day's misery. "I bin there," and fascinated, watched the bus out of sight.

The man's worried mouth dropped open. He was sodden. His clothes were black with damp. The smell of it came off him. The rain stained from the shoulders of his suit past the armpits over the ribs to the waist. It spread from dark blobs over his knees to his thighs. He was a greasy-looking man, once fat, and the fat had gone down unevenly like a deflating bladder. He was calming as I spoke to him.

A sailor, of course, and lost. Hopelessly, blindly lost. I calculated that he must have wandered twenty miles that day exhausting a genius for misdirection.

"Here," I said. "You're soaked. Come and have a drink."

There was a public-house near by. He looked away at once.

"I never touch it," he said. "It's temptation."

I think it was that word which convinced me the sailor was my kind of man. I am, on the whole, glad to say that I am a puritan, and the word temptation went home, painfully, pleasurable, excitingly and intimately familiar. A most stimulating and austere gregarious word, it indicates either the irresistible hypocrite or the fellow-struggler with sin. I couldn't let him go after that.

Presently we were in a café drinking acrid Indian tea.

"Off a ship?" I said.

He looked at me as if I were a magician who could read his soul.

"Thank Gawd I stopped you," he said. "I kep' stopping people all day and they messed me up, but you been straight."

He gave me his papers, his discharge paper, his pension form, official letters, as he said this, like a child handing himself over. Albert Edward Thompson, they said, cook, born '96, invalided out of the service two years before. So he was not just off a ship.

"They're clean," he said suspiciously when I asked him about this. "I got ulcers, riddled with ulcers for fourteen years."

He had no job, and that worried him, because it was the winter. He had ganged on the road, worked in a circus, had been a waiter in an Italian restaurant. But what worried him much more was getting to Whitechapel. He made it sound to me as though for two years he had been threshing about the country, dished by one job and another, in a less and less successful attempt to get there.

"What job are you going to do?" I said.

"I don't know," he said.

"It's a bad time," I said.

"I fall on my feet," he said, "like I done with you."

We sat opposite to each other at the table. He stared at the people in the café with his appalled eyeballs. He was scared of them, and they looked scared too. He looked as though he was going to give a yell and spring at them; in fact, he was likelier to have gone down on his knees to them and to have started

sobbing. They couldn't know this. And then he and I looked at each other and the look discovered that we were the only two decent, trustworthy men in a seedy and grabbing world. Within the next two hours I had given him a job. I was chum no longer, but "Sir". "Chum" was anarchy and the name of any twisty bleeder you knocked up against, but "sir" (for Thompson, out of the naval nursery) was hierarchy, order, pay-day and peace.

I was living alone in the country in those days. I had no one to look after me. I gave Albert Thompson some money, I took him to Whitechapel and wrote down the directions for his journey to my house.

The bungalow where I lived was small and stood just under the brow of a hill. The country was high and stony there. The roads broke up into lanes, the lanes sank into woods and cottages were few. The oak woods were naked and as green as canker. They stood like old men, and below them were sweet plantations of larch where the clockwork pheasants went off like toys in the rainy afternoons. At night you heard a farm dog bark like a pistol and the oceanic sound of the trees, and sometimes, over an hour and a half's walk away, the whistle of a train. But that was all. The few people looked as though they had grown out of the land, sticks and stones in cloth; they were old people chiefly. In the one or two bigger houses they were childless. It was derelict country; frost with its teeth fast in the ground, the wind running finer than sand through a changeless sky or the solitary dribble of water in the butts and the rain legging it over the grass—that was all one heard or saw there.

"Gawd!" said Thompson when he got there. "I thought I'd never strike the place." Pale, coatless again in the wet, his hat tipped back from a face puddingy and martyred, he came up the hill with the dancing step of a man treading on nails. He had been lost again. He had travelled by the wrong train, even by the wrong line, he had assumed that, as in towns, it was safest to follow the crowd. But country crowds soon scatter. He had been following people—it sounded to me—to half the cottages for miles around.

"Then I come to the Common," he said. "I didn't like the look of that. I kept round it."

At last some girl had shown him the way.

I calmed him down. We got to my house and I took him to his

room. He sat down on the bed and told me the story again. He took off his boots and socks and looked at his blistered feet, murmuring to them as if they were a pair of orphans. There was a woman in the train with a kid, he said, and to amuse the kid he had taken out his jack-knife. The woman called the guard.

After we had eaten and I had settled in I went for a walk that afternoon. The pleasure of life in the country for me is in its monotony. One understands how much of living is habit, a long war to which people, plants and animals have settled down. In the country one expects nothing of people; they are themselves, not bringers of gifts. In towns one asks too little or too much of them.

The drizzle had stopped when I went out, the afternoon was warmer and inert and the dull stench of cattle hung over the grass. On my way down the hill I passed the bungalow which was my nearest neighbour. I could see the roof as pink as a slice of salt ham, from the top of my garden. The bungalow was ten years old. A chicken man had built it. Now the woodwork was splitting and shrinking, the garden was rank, two or three larches, which the rabbits had been at, showed above the dead grass and there was a rose-bush. The bush had one frozen and worm-eaten flower which would stick there half the winter. The history of the bungalow was written in the tin bath by the side door. The bath was full of gin, beer and whisky bottles, discarded after the weekend parties of many tenants. People took the place for ever and then, after a month or two, it changed hands. A business man, sentimental about the country, an invalid social worker, a couple with a motor bicycle, an inseparable pair of school-teachers with big legs and jumping jumpers; and now there was a woman I hardly saw, a Colonel's daughter, but the place was said to belong to a man in the Northampton boot trade.

A gramophone was playing when I walked by. Whenever I passed, the Colonel's daughter was either playing the gramophone or digging in the garden. She was a small girl in her late twenties, with a big knowledgeable-looking head under tobacco-brown curls, and the garden fork was nearly as big as herself. Her gardening never lasted long. It consisted usually of digging up a piece of the matted lawn in order to bury tins; but she went at it intensely, drawing back the fork until her hair fell over her face and the sweat stood on her brow. She always had a cigarette in

her mouth, and every now and then the carnation skin of her face, with its warm, dark blue eyes, would be distorted and turned crimson by violent bronchial coughing. When this stopped she would straighten up, the delicacy came back to her skin and she would say, "Oh, Christ. Oh, bloody hell," and you noticed at the end of every speech the fine right eyebrow would rise a little and the lid of the eye below it would quiver. This wink, the limpid wink of the Colonel's daughter, you noticed at once. You wondered what it meant and planned to find out. It was as startling and enticing as a fish rising, and you discovered when you went after it that the Colonel's daughter was the hardest drinking and most blasphemous piece of apparent childish innocence you had ever seen. Old men in pubs gripped their sticks, went scarlet and said someone ought to take her drawers down and give her a tanning. I got a sort of fame from being a neighbour of the Colonel's daughter. "Who's that piece we saw down the road?" people asked.

"Her father's in the Army."

"Not," two or three of them said, for this kind of wit spreads like measles, "the Salvation Army." They said I was a dirty dog. But I hardly knew the Colonel's daughter. Across a field she would wave, utter her obscenity, perform her wink and edge off on her slight legs. Her legs were not very good. But if we met face to face on the road she became embarrassed and nervous; this was one of her dodges. "Still alone?" she said.

"Yes. And you?"

"Yes. What do you do about sex?"

"I haven't got any."

"Oh, God, I wish I'd met you before."

When I had friends she would come to the house. She daren't come there when I was alone, she said. Every night, she said, she locked and bolted up at six. Then the wink—if it was a wink. The men laughed. She did not want to be raped, she said. Their wives froze and some curled up as if they had got the blight and put their hands hard on their husbands' arms. But the few times she came to the house when I was alone, the Colonel's daughter stood by the door, the full length of the room away, with a guilty look on her face.

When I came back from my walk the gramophone had stopped. The Colonel's daughter was standing at the door of her bungalow

with her sleeves rolled up, a pail of water beside her and a scrubbing-brush in her hand.

"Hullo," she said awkwardly.

"Hullo," I said.

"I see you've got the Navy down here. I didn't know you were that way."

"I thought you would have guessed that straight away," I said.

"I found him on the common crying this morning. You've broken his heart." Suddenly she was taken by a fit of coughing.

"Well," she said. "Every day brings forth something."

When I got to the gate of my bungalow I saw that at any rate if Thompson could do nothing else he could bring forth smoke. It was travelling in thick brown funnel-puffs from the short chimney of the kitchen. The smoke came out with such dense streaming energy that the house looked like a destroyer racing full steam ahead into the wave of hills. I went down the path to the kitchen and looked inside. There was Thompson, not only with his sleeves rolled up but his trousers also, and he was shovelling coal into the kitchener with the garden spade, the face of the fire was roaring yellow, the water was throbbing and sighing in the boiler, the pipes were singing through the house.

"Bunkering," Thompson said.

I went into the sitting-room. I thought I had come into the wrong house. The paint had been scrubbed, the floors polished like decks, the reflections of the firelight danced in them, the windows gleamed and the room was glittering with polished metal. Door-knobs, keyholes, fire-irons, window-catches, were polished; metal which I had no idea existed flashed with life.

"What time is supper piped—er ordered?" said Thompson, appearing in his stockinged feet. His big round eyes started out of their dyspeptic shadows and became enthusiastic when I told him the hour.

A change came over my life after this. Before Thompson everything had been disorganized and wearying. He drove my papers and clothes back to their proper places. He brought the zest and routine of the Royal Navy into my life. He kept to his stockinged feet out of tenderness for those orphans, a kind of repentance for what he had done to them; he was collarless and he served food with a splash as if he allowed for the house to give a pitch or a roll which didn't come off. His thumbs left their

marks on the plates. But he was punctual. He lived for "Orders". "All ready, sir," he said, planking down the dish and looking up at the clock at the same moment. Burned, perhaps, spilling over the side, invisible beneath Bisto—but on time!

The secret of happiness is to find a congenial monotony. My own housekeeping had suffered from the imagination. Thompson put an end to this tiring chase of the ideal. "What's orders for lunch, sir?"

"Do you a nice fried chop and chips?" he said. That was settled. He went away, but soon he came back.

"What pudding's ordered, sir?" That stumped both of us, or it stumped me. Thompson watched me to time his own suggestion.

"Do you a nice spotted dick?" So it was. We had this on the second day and the third, we changed on the fourth, but on the fifth we came back to it. Then Thompson's mind gave a leap.

"Do you grilled chop, chips, spotted dick *and custard*?" he said. That became almost our fixed menu. There were bouts of blanc-mange, but spotted dick came back.

Thompson had been sinking towards semi-starvation, I to the insidious Oblomovism of the country. Now we were reformed and happy.

"I always fall on my feet," he said, "like I done with you." It was his refrain.

The winter dripped like a tap, the fog hardly left our hill. Winter in England has the colourless, steaming look of a fried-fish shop-window. But we were stoking huge fires, we bunkered, the garden spade went through coal by the hundredweight. We began to talk a more tangy dialect. Things were not put away; they were "stowed". String appeared in strange knots to make things "fast", plants were "lashed" in the dying garden, washing was "hoist" on the lines, floors were "swabbed". The kitchen became the "galley". The postman came "alongside", all meals were "piped" and at bedtime we "piped down". At night, hearing the wind bump in the chimneys and slop like ocean surf in the woods, looking out at the leather darkness, I had the sensation that we were creeping down the Mersey in a fog or lumping about in the Atlantic swell off Ushant.

I was happy. But was Thompson happy? He seemed to be. In the mornings we were both working, but in the afternoons there was little more to do. He sat on a low chair with his knees close

to the bars of the range or on the edge of his bed, darning his clothes. (He lived in a peculiar muddle of his own and he was dirty in his own quarters.) In the evenings he did the same and sometimes we talked. He told me about his life. There was nothing in it at all. It was buried under a mumble of obscurity. His memories were mainly of people who hadn't "behaved right", a dejecting moral wilderness with Thompson mooching about in it, disappointed with human nature. He didn't stay to talk with me much. He preferred the kitchen where, the oil-lamp smoking, the range smoking and himself smoking, he sat chewing it all over, gazing into the fire.

"You can go out, you know," I said, "whenever you want. Do what you like."

"I'm O.K.," he said.

"See some of the people," I said. Thompson said he'd just as lief stand by.

Everyone knows his own business best. But I was interested one night when I heard the sound of voices in the kitchen. Someone had come in. The voices went on on other nights. Who was it? The milker from the farm probably or the cowman who cleaned out cess-pits by lantern light at night and talked with nostalgia about burying bodies during the war. "If there hadn't been a war," this man used to say, "I wouldn't have seen nothing. It was an education."

I listened. Slow in question, slow in answer, the monotonous voices came. The woodcutter, the postman? I went into the kitchen to see who the profound and interminable crony was.

There was no one. There was only Thompson in the kitchen. Sitting close to the fire with all windows closed, a sallow, stupefied, oil-haired head in his own fug, Thompson was spelling out a story from a *Wild West Magazine*. It was old and dirty and his coal-blackened finger was moving from word to word.

So far Thompson had refused to go out of the house except as far as the coal-shed, but I was determined after this discovery that he should go out. I waited until pay-day.

"Here's your money," I said. "Take the afternoon off."

Thompson stepped back from the money.

"You keep it," he said, in a panic. "You keep it for me."

"You may need it," I said. "For a glass of beer or cigarettes or something."

"If I have it, I'll lose it," he said. "They'll pinch it."

"Who?" I said.

"People," Thompson said. I could not persuade him.

"All right, I'll keep it for you," I said.

"Yes," he said eagerly. "If I want a bob I'll ask you. Money's temptation," he said.

"Well, anyway," I said, "take the afternoon off. It's the first sunny afternoon we've had. I'll tell you where to go. Turn to the right in the lane . . ."

"I don't like them lanes," said Thompson, looking suspiciously out of the window. "I'll stay by you."

"Well, take a couple of hours," I said. "We all need fresh air."

He looked at me as if I had suggested he should poison himself; indeed as if I were going to do the poisoning.

"What if I do an hour?" he began to bargain.

"No, the afternoon," I said.

"Do you half an hour?" he pleaded.

"All right, I don't want to force you," I said. "This is a free country. Go for an hour."

It was like an auction.

"Tell you what," he said, looking shifty. "I'll do you twenty minutes." He thought he had tricked me, but I went back into the kitchen and drove him to it. I had given him an overcoat and shoes, and it was this appeal to his vanity which got him. Out he went for his twenty minutes. He was going straight down the lane to where it met the main road and then straight back; it would take a smart walker about twelve minutes on a winter's day.

When an hour passed I was pleased with myself. But when four hours had gone by and darkness came I began to wonder. I went out to the gate. The land and the night had become one thing. I had just gone in again when I heard loud voices and saw the swing of a lamp. There came Thompson with a labourer. The labourer, a little bandy man known as Fleas, stood like a bent bush with a sodden sack on his shoulders, snuffling in the darkness, and he grinned at me with the malevolence of the land.

"He got astray," he said, handing Thompson over.

"Gawd," exclaimed Thompson, exhausted. His face was the familiar pale suety agony. He was full of explanations. He was sweating like a scared horse and nearly hysterical. He'd been on the wrong course. He didn't know where to steer. One thing

looked like another. Roads and lanes, woods and fields, mixed themselves together.

"Woods I seen," he said in horror. "And that common! It played me up proper."

"But you weren't anywhere near the common," I said.

"Then what was it?" he said.

That night he sat by the fire with his head in his hands.

"I got a mood," he said.

The next morning cigarette smoke blew past my window and I heard coughing. The Colonel's daughter was at the kitchen door talking to Thompson. "Cheero," I heard her say, and then she came to my door and pushed it open. She stood there gravely and her eye winked. She was wearing a yellow jersey and looked as neat as a bird.

"You're a swine," she said.

"What have I done?"

"Raping women on the commons," she said. "Deserting your old friends, aren't you?"

"It's been too wet on the common," I said.

"Not for me," she said. "I'm always hopeful. I came across last night. There was the Minister's wife screaming in the middle of it. I sat on her head and calmed her down and she said a man had been chasing her. 'Stop screaming,' I said. 'You flatter yourself, dear.' It was getting dark and I carried her shopping-bag and umbrella for her and took her to her house. I often go and see her in the evenings. I've got to do something, haven't I? I can't stick alone in that bungalow all day and all night. We sit and talk about her son in China. When you're old you'll be lonely too."

"What happened on the common?"

"I think I'm drunk," said the Colonel's daughter, "but I believe I've been drunk since breakfast. Well, where was I? I'm losing my memory too. Well, we hadn't gone five minutes before I heard someone panting like a dog behind us and jumping over bushes. Old Mrs Stour started screaming again. 'Stand still,' I said, and I looked and then a man came out of a tree about ten yards away. 'What the hell do you want?' I said. A noise came back like a sheep. 'Ma'am, ma'am, ma'am, ma'am,' it said."

"So that's where Thompson was," I said.

"I thought it was you," the Colonel's daughter said. "There's a woman set about me with a stick on the common," he said. "I

didn't touch her, I was only following her,' he said. 'I reckoned if I followed her I'd get home.'"

When they got to the wood Thompson wouldn't go into it and she had to take his hand; that was a mistake. He took his hand away and moved off. So she grabbed his coat. He struggled after this, she chased him into the thicket and told him not to be a fool, but he got away and disappeared, running on to the common.

"You're a damn swine," the Colonel's daughter said to me. "How would you like to be put down in the middle of the sea?"

She walked away. I watched her go up the path and lean on the gate opposite to stroke the nose of a horse. She climbed into the field and the horses, like hairy yokels, went off. I heard her calling them, but they did not come.

When she was out of sight, the door opened behind me and Thompson came in.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "That young lady, sir. She's been round my kitchen door."

"Yes," I said.

He gaped at me and then burst out:

"I didn't touch her, straight I didn't. I didn't lay a finger on her."

"She didn't say you did. She was trying to help you."

He calmed down. "Yes, sir," he said.

When he came back into the room to lay the table I could see he was trying to catch my eye.

"Sir," he said at last, standing at attention. "Beg pardon, sir, the young lady . . ."

His mouth was opening and shutting, trying to shape a sentence.

"The young lady—she'd had a couple, sir," he said in a rush.

"Oh," I said, "don't worry about that. She often has."

"It's ruination, sir," said Thompson evangelically.

She did not come to the house again for many days, but when she came I heard him lock both kitchen doors.

Orders at the one extreme, temptation at the other, were the good and evil of Thompson's life. I no longer suggested that he went out. I invented errands and ordered him to go. I wanted, in that unfortunate way one has, to do good to Thompson. I wanted him to be free and happy. At first he saw that I was not used to giving orders and he tried to dodge. His ulcers were bad,

he said. Once or twice he went about barefoot, saying the sole was off one of his boots. But when he saw I meant what I said, he went. I used to watch him go, tilted forward on his toes in his half-running walk, like someone throwing himself blindly upon the mercy of the world. When he came back he was excited. He had the look of someone stupefied by incomprehensible success. It is the feeling a landsman has when he steps off a boat after a voyage. You feel giddy, canny, surprised at your survival after crossing that bridge of deep, loose water. You boast. So did Thompson—morally.

"There was a couple of tramps on the road," Thompson said. "I steered clear. I never talked to them," he said.

"Someone asked me who I was working for." He described the man. "I never told him," he said shrewdly. "I just said 'A gentleman'. Meaning you," he said.

There was a man in an allotment who had asked him for a light and wanted to know his business.

"I told him I didn't smoke," said Thompson. "You see my meaning—you don't know what it's leading up to. There warn't no harm, but that's how temptation starts."

What was temptation? Almost everything was temptation to Thompson. Pubs, cinemas, allotments, chicken-runs, tobacconists—in these, everywhere, the tempter might be. Temptation, like Othello's jealousy, was the air itself.

"I expect you'd like to go to church," I said. He seemed that kind.

"I got nothing *against* religion," Thompson said. "But best keep clear. They see you in church and the next thing they're after you."

"Who?" I asked.

"People," he said. "It's not like a ship."

I was like him, he said, I kept myself to myself. I kept out of temptation's way. He was glad I was like that, he said.

It was a shock to me that while I observed Thompson, Thompson observed me. At the same time one prides oneself, the moment one's character is defined by someone else, on defeating the definition. I kept myself to myself? I avoided temptation? That was all Thompson knew! There was the Colonel's daughter. I might not see her very often; she might be loud, likeable, dreary or alarming by turns, but she was Temptation itself. How did he

know I wasn't tempted? Thompson's remark made me thrill. I began to see rather more of the Colonel's daughter.

And so I discovered how misleading he had been about his habits and how, where temptation was concerned, he made a difference between profession and practice. So strong was Thompson's feeling about temptation that he was drawn at once to every tempter he saw. He stopped them on the road and was soon talking about it. The postman was told. The shopkeepers heard all his business and mine. He hurried after tramps, he detained cyclists, he sat down on the banks with roadmakers and ditchers, telling them the dangers of drink, the caution to be kept before strangers. And after he had done this he always ended by telling them he kept himself to himself, avoided drink, ignored women and, patting his breast pocket, said that was where he kept his money and his papers. He behaved to them exactly as he had behaved with me two months before in the Euston Road. The Colonel's daughter told me. She picked up all the news in that district.

"He's a decent, friendly soul," muttered the Colonel's daughter thickly. "You're a prig. Keep your hair on. You can't help it. I expect you're decent, too, but you're like all my bloody so-called friends."

"Oh," I said hopefully, "are prigs your special line?"

I found out, too, why Thompson was always late when he came home from his errands. I had always accepted that he was lost. And so he was in a way, but he was lost through wandering about with people, following them to their doorsteps, drifting to their allotments, backyards and, all the time, telling them, as he clung to their company, about the dangers of human intercourse. "I never speak to nobody"—it was untrue, but it was not a lie. It was simply a delusion.

"He lives in two worlds at once," I said to the Colonel's daughter one morning. I had sent Thompson to the town to buy the usual chops, and I was sitting in her bungalow. This was the first time I had ever been in it. The walls were of varnished match-boarding like the inside of a gospel hall and the room was heated by a paraffin stove which smelled like armpits. There were two rexine-covered chairs, a rug and a table in the room. She was sorting out gramophone records as I talked and the records she did not like she dropped to the floor and broke. She

was listening very little to what I said, but walked to the gramophone, put on a record, stopped it after a few turns and then, switching it off, threw the record away.

"Oh, you know a hell of a lot, don't you?" she said. "I don't say you're not an interesting man, but you don't get on with it, do you?"

"How old are you? Twenty-five?" I said.

Her sulking, ironical expression went. She was astonished.

"Good God!" she exclaimed with a smile of sincerity. "Don't be a damn fool." Then she frowned. "Or are you being professionally clever?"

"Here," she said. "I was damn pretty when I was twenty-five. I'm thirty-nine. I've still got a good figure."

"I would have put you at twenty-seven at the most," I said truthfully.

She walked towards me. I was sitting on the armchair and she stood very close. She had never been as close to me before. I had thought her eyes were dark blue, but now I saw they were green and grey, with a moist lascivious haze in them and yet dead and clock-like, like a cat's on a sunless day. And the skin, which had seemed fresh to me, I saw in its truth for the first time. It was clouded and flushed, clouded with that thickened pimpled ruddiness which the skin of heavy drinkers has and which in middle-age becomes bloated and mottled. I felt: this is why she has always stood the length of the room away before.

She saw what was in my mind and she sat down on the chair opposite to me. The eye winked.

"Keep control of yourself," she said. "I came down here for a rest and now you've started coming round."

"Only in the mornings," I said.

She laughed. She went to a bookshelf and took down a bottle of whisky and poured out half a tumblerful.

"This is what you've done coming in here, early bird," she said. "Exciting me on an empty stomach. I haven't touched it for ten days. I had a letter this morning. From my old man."

"Your father?"

I had always tried to imagine the Colonel. She gave a shout of cheerful laughter and it ended in coughing till tears came to her eyes.

"That's rich. God, that's rich. Keen observer of women! No,

from my husband, darling. He's not my husband, damn him, of course, but when you've lived with someone for ten years and he pays the rent and keeps you, he is your husband, isn't he? Or ought to be. Ten years is a long time and his family thought he ought to be married. He thought so too. So he picked up a rich American girl and pushed me down here to take it easy in the country. I'm on the dole like your sailor boy. Well, I said, if he felt that way, he'd better have his head. In six months he'll tire of the new bitch. So I left him alone. I didn't want to spoil his fun. Well, now, he writes me, he wants to bring his *fiancée* down because she's heard so much about me and adores the country. . . ."

I was going to say something indignant.

"He's nice, too," she said casually. "He sells gas-heaters. You'd like him all the same. But blast that bloody woman," she said, raising her cool voice. "She's turned him into a snob. I'm just his whore now."

"Don't look so embarrassed," she said. "I'm not going to cry."

"For ten years," she said, "I read books, I learned French, educated myself, learned to say 'How d'you do' instead of 'Pleased to meet you', and look down my nose at everything in his sort of way. And I let him go about saying my father was in the Army too, but they were such bloody fools they thought he must be a Colonel. They'd never heard of sergeant-majors having children. Even my old man, bless his heart," she smiled affectionately, "thought or let himself think they did. I was a damn silly little snob."

"I don't know him," I said. "But he doesn't sound much good to me."

"That's where you're wrong," she said sharply. "Just weak, poor kid, that's all. You don't know what it is to be ashamed your mother's a housemaid. I got over it—but he didn't, that's all."

She paused and the wink gave its signal.

"This is more embarrassing than I thought," she said.

"I am very sorry," I said. "Actually I am in favour of snobbery, it is a sign of character. It's a bad thing to have, but it's a bad thing not to have had. You can't help having the diseases of your time."

"There you go," she said.

The suffering of others is incredible. When it is obscure it seems like a lie; when it is garish and raw, it is like boasting. It is a

challenge to oneself. I got up from my chair and went towards her. I was going to kiss her.

"You are the sentimental type," she said.

So I didn't kiss her.

Then we heard someone passing the bungalow and she went to the window. Thompson was going by. The lock of black hair was curling over his sweating forehead and he gave a hesitant staggering look at the bungalow. There was a lump of fear on his face.

"He'd better not know where you've been," she said. She moved her lips to be kissed, but I walked out.

I was glad of the steady sense of the fresh grey air when I got outside. I was angry and depressed. I stood at the window of my house. Thompson came in and was very talkative. He'd been lost, of course. He'd seen people. He'd seen fields. He'd heard trees. He'd seen roads. I hardly listened. I was used to the jerky wobbling voice. I caught the words "legion" and "temptation", and thought he was quoting from the Bible. Presently I realized he was talking about the British Legion. The postman had asked him to go to a meeting of the British Legion that night. How simple other people's problems are! Yet "No" Thompson was saying. He was not going to the British Legion. It was temptation.

I ought to have made love to her and kissed her, I was thinking. She was right, I was a prig.

"You go," I said to Thompson, "if you want to. You'd enjoy it."

But how disgusting, obvious, stupid, to have made love to her then, I thought.

"Do as you like," I said.

"I'm best alongside you," said Thompson.

"You can't always be by me," I said. "In a month, perhaps less, as you know, I'll be leaving here and you'll have to go."

"Yes," he said. "You tol' me. You been straight. I'll be straight with you. I won't go to the Legion."

We ate our meal and I read.

"In every branch of our spiritual and material civilization we seem to have reached a turning point," I read. "This spirit shows itself not only in the actual state of public affairs . . ."

Well, I thought, I can ask her over to-night. I needn't be a fool twice. I went out for an hour. When I returned, Thompson

was fighting Temptation hard. If he went to the Legion how would he get back? No, best not. He took the Legion on in its strength. (She is a type, I thought.) At four he was still at it. At five he asked me for his money. (Well, we are all types, I was thinking.) Very shortly he brought the money back and asked me to keep his pension papers. At half-past six I realized this meant that Thompson was losing and the Legion and all its devils winning. (What is a prig, anyway?) He was looking out at the night. Yet, just when I thought he had lost, he had won. There was the familiar sound of the Wild West monologue in the kitchen. It was half-past eight. The Legion was defeated.

I was disappointed in Thompson. Really, not to have had more guts than that! Restlessly I looked out of the window. There was a full moon spinning on the tail of a dying wind. Under the moonlight the fields were like wide-awake faces, the woods like womanish heads of hair upon them. I put on my hat and coat and went out. I was astonished by the circle of stars. They were as distinct as figures on a clock. I took out my watch and compared the small time in my hand with the wide time above. Then I walked on. There was a sour smell at the end of the wood, where, no doubt, a dead rabbit or pigeon was rotting.

I came out of the wood on to the metalled road. Suddenly my heart began to beat quickly as I hurried down the road, but it was a long way round now. I cut across fields. There was a cottage and a family were listening to a dance-band on the wireless. A man was going the rounds of his chickens. There was a wheelbarrow and there were spades and steel bars where a water-mill was being built.

Then I crossed the last fields and saw the bungalow. My heart throbbed heavily and I felt all my blood slow down and my limbs grow heavy. It was only when I got to the road that I saw there were no lights in the bungalow. The Colonel's daughter, the Sergeant's daughter, had gone to bed early like a child. While I stood I heard men's voices singing across the fields. It must have gone ten o'clock and people were coming out of the public-house. In all the villages of England, at this hour, loud-voiced groups were breaking up and dispersing into the lanes.

I got to my house and lit a candle. The fire was low. I was exhausted and happy to be in my house among my own things, as if I had got into my own skin again. There was no light in the

kitchen. Thompson had gone to bed. I grinned at the thought of the struggles of poor Thompson. I picked up a book and read. I could hear still the sound of that shouting and singing. The beer was sour and flat in this part of the country but it made people sing.

The singing voices came nearer. I put down the book. An argument was going on in the lane. I listened. The argument was nearing the cottage. The words got louder. They were going on at my gate. I heard the gate go and the argument was on my path. Suddenly—there could be no doubt—people were coming to the door. I stood up, I could recognize no voice. Loud singing, stumbling feet, then bang! The door broke open and crashed against the wall. Tottering, drunk, with their arms round each other, Thompson and the Colonel's daughter nearly fell into the room.

Thompson stared at me with terror.

"Stand up, sailor," said the Colonel's daughter, clinging to him.

"He was lonely," she said unsteadily to me. "We've been playing gramophone records. Sing," she said.

Thompson was still staring.

"Don't look at him. Sing," she said. Then she gave a low laugh and they fell, bolt upright on the sofa like prim, dishevelled dolls.

A look of wild love of all the world came into Thompson's eyes and he smiled as I had never seen him smile before. He suddenly opened his twitching mouth and bawled:

*"You've robbed every tailor,
And you've skinned every sailor,
But you won't go walking Paradise Street no more."*

"Go on. That's not all," the Colonel's daughter cried and sang, "Go on—something—something, deep and rugged shore."

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him. He gaped at her with panic and looked at her skirt. It was undone.

He pointed at her leg in consternation. The sight sobered him. He pulled away his arms and rushed out of the room. He did not come back. She looked at me and giggled. Her eyes were warm and shining. She picked leaves off her skirt.

"Where's he gone? Where's he gone?" she kept asking.

"He's gone to bed," I said.

She started a fit of coughing. It strained her throat. Her eyes were dilated like an animal's, caught in a trap, and she held her hand to her chest.

"I wish," she cried hysterically, pointing at me in the middle of her coughing, "I wish you could see your bloody face."

She got up and called out:

"Thompson! Thompson!" And when he did not answer she sang out, "Down by the deep and rugged shore—ore-ore-ore."

"What's the idea?" I said.

"I want Thompson," she said. "He's the only man up here."

Then she began to cry. She marched out to his room, but it was locked. She was wandering through the other rooms calling him and then she went out, away up the path. She went calling him all the way down to her bungalow.

In the morning Thompson appeared as usual. He brought the breakfast. He came in for "orders". Grilled chop, did I think? And what about spotted dick? He seemed no worse. He behaved as though nothing had happened. There was no guilty look in his eyes and no apprehension. He made no apology. Lunch passed, tea-time and the day. I finished my work and went into the kitchen.

"Tell me," I said, "about last night."

Thompson was peeling potatoes. He used to do this into a bucket on the floor, as if he were peeling for a whole crew. He put down the clasp-knife and stood up. He looked worried.

"That was a terrible thing," Thompson said, as if it was something he had read about in the papers.

"Terrible, sir. A young lady like that, sir. To come over here for me, an educated lady like that. Someone oughter teach her a lesson. Coming over and saying she wanted to play some music. I was took clean off my guard."

"It wasn't right," said Thompson. "Whichever way you look at it, it wasn't right. I told her she'd messed me up."

"I'm not blaming you. I want to know."

"And she waited till you was out," Thompson said. "That's not straight. She may class herself as an educated young lady, but do you know what I reckon she is? I reckon she's a jane."

I went down to the bungalow. I was beginning to laugh now. She was in the garden digging. Her sleeves were rolled up and she was sweating over the fork. The beds were thick with leaves

and dead plants. I stood there watching her. She looked at me nervously for a moment. "I'm making the garden tidy," she said. "For Monday. When the bitch comes down."

She was shy and awkward. I walked on and, looking back, saw her go into the house. It was the last I ever saw of her. When I came back the fork she had been using was stuck in the flower-bed where she had left it. She went to London that night and did not return.

"Thank Gawd," Thompson said.

There was a change in Thompson after this and there was a change in me. Perhaps the change came because the dirty February days were going, the air softer and the year moving. I was leaving soon. Thompson mentioned temptation no more. Now he went out every day. The postman was his friend. They used to go to the pub. He asked for his money. In the public-house the labourers sat around muttering in a language Thompson didn't understand. He stood them drinks. At his first pint he would start singing. They encouraged him. He stood them more drinks. The postman ordered them for him and then tapped him on the pocket-book. They emptied his pockets every night. They despised him and even brought complaints to me about him after they had emptied his pockets.

Thompson came back across the common alone, wild, enthusiastic and moaning with suspicion by turns. The next day he would have a mood. All the countryside for ten miles around knew the sailor. He became famous.

Our last week came. He quietened down.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'll stay by you."

"You can't," I said. "I'll be going abroad."

"You needn't pay me," he said. "I'll stay by you." It was hard to make him understand he could not stay with me. He was depressed.

"Get me out of here safe," he pleaded at last. "Come with me to the station." He could not go on his own because all the people he knew would be after him. He had told them he was going. He had told them I was saving his pension and his last fortnight's pay. They would come creeping out of cottage doors and ditches for him. So I packed his things and got a taxi to call for us. How slowly we had lived and moved in these fields and lanes. Now we

broke through it all with a rush as the car dropped down the hill and the air blew in at the window. As we passed the bungalow with the sun on its empty windows I saw the fork standing in the neglected bed. Then we swept on. Thompson sat back in the car so that no one should see him, but I leaned forward to see everything for the last time and forget it.

We got to the town. As the taxi slowed down in the streets people looked out of shops, doors, a potman nodded from the pub.

"Whatcha, Jack," the voices called.

The police, the fishmonger, boys going to school, dozens of people waved to him. I might have been riding with royalty. At the station a large woman sweeping down the steps of the bank straightened up and gave a shout.

"Hi, Jacko!" she called, bending double, went into shrieks of laughter and called across to a friend at a first-floor window. It was a triumph. But Thompson ignored them all. He sat back out of sight.

"Thank Gawd I've got you," he said. "They skin you of everything."

We sat in the train. It was a two-hour journey.

"Once I strike Whitechapel," he said in the voice of one naming Singapore, "I'll be O.K." He said this several times, averting his face from the passing horror of the green fields.

"Don't you worry," he said. "Don't fret yourself for me. Don't you worry." His optimism increased as mine dwindled as we got nearer London. By the time we reached London he was almost shouting. "I'll fall on my feet, don't you worry. I'll send you my address."

We stood on the kerb and I watched him walk off into the yellow rain and the clogged, grunting and mewing traffic. He stepped right into it without looking. Taxis braked to avoid him. He was going to walk to Whitechapel. He reckoned it was safer.

Oedipus Complex

“GOOD MORNING, Mr P,” said Mr Pollfax, rinsing and drying his hands after the last patient. “How’s Mr P?” I was always Mr P until I sat in the chair and he switched the lamp on and had my mouth open. Then I got a peerage.

“That’s fine, my lord,” said Mr Pollfax, having a look inside.

Dogged, with its slight suggestion of doggish, was the word for Mr Pollfax. He was a short man, jaunty, hair going thin, with jaunty buttocks and a sway to his walk. He had two lines, from habitual grinning, cut deep from the nostrils, and scores of lesser lines like the fine hair of a bird’s nest round his egg-blue eyes. There was something innocent, heroic and determined about Mr Pollfax, something of the English Tommy in tin hat and full pack going up the line. He suggested in a quiet way—war.

He was the best dentist I ever had. He got you into the chair, turned on the light, tapped around a bit with a thing like a spoon and then, dropping his white-coated arm to his side, told you a story. Several more stories followed in his flat Somerset voice, when he had your mouth jacked up. And then, removing the towel and with a final “Rinse that lot out”, he finished with the strangest story of all and let you go. A month or so later the bill came in. “Mr Pollfax presents his compliments”, and across the bottom of it, in his hand, “Be good.” I have never known a dentist like Mr Pollfax.

“Open, my lord,” said Mr Pollfax. “Let’s see what sort of life his lordship has been leading. Still smoking that filthy pipe, I see. I shall have to do some cleaning up.”

He tapped around and then dropped his arm. A look of anxiety came on his face. “Did I tell you that one about the girl who went to the Punch and Judy show? No? Nor the one about the engine-driver who was put on sentry duty in Syria? You’re sure? When did I see you last? What was the last one I told you? That sounds like last April? Lord, you *have* been letting things go. Well,” said Mr Pollfax, tipping back my head and squirting something on to a tooth, “we’ll have a go at that root at the back. It’s not doing you any good. It was like this. There was a girl

sitting on the beach at Barmouth with her young man watching a Punch and Judy show . . ." (Closer and closer came Mr Pollfax's head, lower and lower went his voice.)

He took an instrument and began chipping his way through the tooth and the tale.

"Not bad, eh?" he said, stepping back with a sudden shout of laughter.

"Ah," I mouthed.

"All right, my lord," said Mr Pollfax, withdrawing the instrument and relapsing into his dead professional manner. "Spit that lot out."

He began again.

There was just that root, Mr Pollfax was saying. It was no good there. There was nothing else wrong; he'd have it out in a couple of shakes.

"Though, my lord," he said, "you did grow it about as far back in your throat as you could, didn't you, trying to make it as difficult as you could for Mr Pollfax? What we'll do first of all is to give it a dose of something."

He swivelled the dish of instruments towards me and gave a tilt to the lamp. I remembered that lamp because once the bulb had exploded, sending glass all over the room. It was fortunate, Mr Pollfax said at the time, that it had blown the other way and none of it had hit me, for someone might have brought a case for damages against someone—which reminded him of the story of the honeymoon couple who went to a small hotel in Aberdeen. . . .

"Now," said Mr Pollfax, dipping things in little pots and coming to me with an injection needle; "open wide, keep dead still. I was reading Freud the other day. There's a man. Oedipus complex? Ever read about that? Don't move, don't breathe, you'll feel a prick, but for God's sake don't jump. I don't want it to break in your gum. I've never had one break yet, touch wood, but they're thin, and if it broke off you'd be in a nursing-home three weeks and Mr Pollfax would be down your throat looking for it. The trouble about these little bits of wire is they move a bit farther into the system every time you swallow."

"There now," said Mr Pollfax.

"Feel anything? Feel it prick?" he said. "Fine."

He went to a cupboard and picked out the instrument of extraction and then stood, working it up and down like a

gardener's secateurs in his hand. He studied my face. He was a cleanshaven man and looked like a priest in his white coat.

"Some of the stories you hear!" exclaimed Mr Pollfax. "And some of the songs. I mean where I come from. 'The Lot that Lily Lost in the Lottery'—know that one? Is your skin beginning to tingle, do you feel it on the tip of your tongue yet? That's fine, my lord. I'll sing it to you."

Mr Pollfax began to sing. He'd give it another minute, he said, when he'd done with Lily; he'd just give me the chorus of "The Night Uncle's Waistcoat Caught Fire."

"Tra la la," sang Mr Pollfax.

"I bet," said Mr Pollfax sadistically, "one side of his lordship's face has gone dead and his tongue feels like a pin-cushion."

"Blah," I said.

"I think," he said, "we'll begin."

So Mr Pollfax moved round to the side of me, got a grip on my shoulders and began to press on the instrument in my mouth. Pressing and drawing firmly, he worked upon the root. Then he paused and increased the pressure. He seemed to be hanging from a crowbar fixed to my jaw. Nothing happened. He withdrew.

"The Great Flood begins," said Mr Pollfax, putting a tube in my mouth and taking another weapon from the tray.

The operation began again. Mr Pollfax now seemed to hang and swing on the crowbar. It was not successful.

"Dug himself in, has he?" muttered Mr Pollfax. He had a look at his instruments. "You can spit, my lord," he said.

Mr Pollfax now seized me with great determination, hung, swung, pressed and tugged with increased energy.

"It's no good you thinking you're going to stay in," said Mr Pollfax in mid-air, muttering to the root. But the instrument slipped and a piece of tooth broke off as he spoke.

"So that's the game is it?" said Mr Pollfax, withdrawing. "Good rinse, my lord, while Mr Pollfax considers the position."

He was breathing hard.

Oh well, he said, there were more ways than one of killing a cat. He'd get the drill on it. There were two Jews standing outside Buckingham Palace when a policeman came by, he said, coming at me with the drill which made a whistling noise like a fishing-line as he drew it through. The tube gurgled in my mouth. I was looking, as I always did at Mr Pollfax's, at the cowl busily

twirling on the chimneys opposite. Wind or no wind, these cowls always seemed to be twirling round. Two metal cowls on two yellow chimneys. I always remember them.

"Spit, my lord," said Mr Pollfax, changing to a coarser drill. "Sorry, old man, if it slipped, but Mr Pollfax is not to be beaten."

The drill whirred again, skidding and whining; the cowls twirled on the chimneys, Mr Pollfax's knuckles were on my nose. What he was trying to do, he said, was to get a purchase.

Mr Pollfax's movements got quicker. He hung up the drill, he tapped impatiently on the tray, looking for something. He came at me with something like a button-hook. He got it in. He levered like a signalman changing points.

"I'm just digging," he said. Another piece of tooth broke off. Mr Pollfax started when he heard it go and drew back.

"Mr Pollfax in a dilemma," he said.

Well, he'd try the other side. Down came the drill again. There were beads of sweat on his brow. His breath was shorter.

"You see," exclaimed Mr Pollfax suddenly and loudly, looking angrily up at his clock. "I'm fighting against time. Keep that head this way, hold the mouth. That's right. Sorry, my lord, I've got to bash you about, but time's against me."

"Why, damn this root," said Mr Pollfax, hanging up again. "It's wearing out my drill. We'll have to saw. Mr Pollfax is up against it."

His face was red now, he was gasping and his eyes were glittering. A troubled and emotional look came over Mr Pollfax's face.

"I've been up against it in my time," exclaimed Mr Pollfax forcefully between his teeth. "You heard me mention the Oedipus complex to you?"

"Blah," I managed.

"I started well by ruining my father. I took every penny he had. That's a good start, isn't it?" he said, speaking very rapidly. "Then I got married. Perfectly happy marriage, but I went and bust it up. I went off with a French girl and her husband shot at us out in the car one day. I was with that girl eighteen months and she broke her back in a railway accident and I sat with her six months watching her die. Six ruddy months. I've been through it. Then my mother died and my father was going to marry again, a girl young enough to be his daughter. I went up and

took that girl off him, ran off to Hungary with her, married her and we've got seven children. Perfect happiness at last. I've been through the mill," said Mr Pollfax, relaxing his chin and shining a torch down my mouth, "but I've come out in the end."

"A good rinse, my noble lord," said Mr Pollfax.

"The oldest's fourteen," he said, getting the saw. "Clever girl. Very clever with her hands."

He seized me again. Did I feel anything? Well, thank God for that, said Mr Pollfax. Here we'd been forty minutes with this damned root.

"And I bet you're thinking why didn't Mr Pollfax let sleeping dogs lie, like the telephone operator said. Did I tell you that one about the telephone operator? That gum of yours is going to be sore."

He was standing, legs apart, chin trembling, eyes blinking, hacking with the button-hook, like a wrestler putting on a headlock.

"Mr Pollfax with his back against the wall," he said, between his teeth.

"Mr Pollfax making a last-minute stand," he hissed.

"On the burning deck!" he gasped.

"Whence," he added, "all but he had fled."

"Spit," he said. "And now let's have another look." He wiped his brow. "Don't say anything. Keep dead still. For God's sake don't let it hear you. My lords, ladies and gentlemen, pray silence for Mr Pollfax. It's coming, it isn't. No, it isn't. It is. It is. There," he cried, holding a fragment in his fingers.

He stood gravely to attention.

*"And his chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead,"*

said Mr Pollfax. "A good and final spit, my lord and prince."

The Saint

WHEN I was seventeen years old I lost my religious faith. It had been unsteady for some time and then, very suddenly, it went as the result of an incident in a punt on the river outside the town where we lived. My uncle, with whom I was obliged to stay for long periods of my life, had started a small furniture-making business in the town. He was always in difficulties about money, but he was convinced that in some way God would help him. And this happened. An investor arrived who belonged to a sect called the Church of the Last Purification, of Toronto, Canada. Could we imagine, this man asked, a good and omnipotent God allowing His children to be short of money? We had to admit we could not imagine this. The man paid some capital into my uncle's business and we were converted. Our family were the first Purifiers—as they were called—in the town. Soon a congregation of fifty or more were meeting every Sunday in a room at the Corn Exchange.

At once we found ourselves isolated and hated people. Everyone made jokes about us. We had to stand together because we were sometimes dragged into the courts. What the unconverted could not forgive in us was first that we believed in successful prayer and, secondly, that our revelation came from Toronto. The success of our prayers had a simple foundation. We regarded it as "Error"—our name for Evil—to believe the evidence of our senses, and if we had influenza or consumption, or had lost our money or were unemployed, we denied the reality of these things, saying that since God could not have made them they therefore did not exist. It was exhilarating to look at our congregation and to know that what the vulgar would call miracles were performed among us, almost as a matter of routine, every day. Not very big miracles, perhaps; but up in London and out in Toronto we knew that deafness and blindness, cancer and insanity, the great scourges, were constantly vanishing before the prayers of the more advanced Purifiers.

"What!" said my schoolmaster, an Irishman with eyes like broken glass and a sniff of irritability in the bristles of his nose.

"What! Do you have the impudence to tell me that if you fell off the top floor of this building and smashed your head in, you would say you hadn't fallen and were not injured?"

I was a small boy and very afraid of everybody, but not when it was a question of my religion. I was used to the kind of conundrum the Irishman had set. It was useless to argue, though our religion had already developed an interesting casuistry.

"*I would say so,*" I replied with coldness and some vanity. "And my head would not be smashed."

"You would not say so," answered the Irishman. "You would not say so." His eyes sparkled with pure pleasure. "You'd be dead."

The boys laughed, but they looked at me with admiration.

Then, I do not know how or why, I began to see a difficulty. Without warning and as if I had gone into my bedroom at night and had found a gross ape seated in my bed and thereafter following me about with his grunts and his fleas and a look, relentless and ancient, scored on his brown face, I was faced with the problem which prowls at the centre of all religious faith. I was faced by the difficulty of the origin of evil. Evil was an illusion, we were taught. But even illusions have an origin. The Purifiers denied this.

I consulted my uncle. Trade was bad at the time and this made his faith abrupt. He frowned as I spoke.

"When did you brush your coat last?" he said. "You're getting slovenly about your appearance. If you spent more time studying books"—that is to say, the Purification literature—"and less with your hands in your pockets and playing about with boats on the river, you wouldn't be letting Error in."

All dogmas have their jargon; my uncle as a business man loved the trade-terms of the Purification. "Don't let Error in," was a favourite one. The whole point about the Purification, he said, was that it was scientific and therefore exact; in consequence it was sheer weakness to admit discussion. Indeed, betrayal. He unpinched his pince-nez, stirred his tea and indicated I must submit or change the subject. Preferably the latter. I saw, to my alarm, that my arguments had defeated my uncle. Faith and doubt pulled like strings round my throat.

"You don't mean to say you don't believe that what our Lord said was true?" my aunt asked nervously, following me out of the room. "Your uncle does, dear."

I could not answer. I went out of the house and down the main street to the river, where the punts were stuck like insects in the summery flash of the reach. Life was a dream, I thought; no, a nightmare, for the ape was beside me.

I was still in this state, half sulking and half exalted, when Mr Hubert Timberlake came to the town. He was one of the important people from the headquarters of our Church and he had come to give an address on the Purification at the Corn Exchange. Posters announcing this were everywhere. Mr Timberlake was to spend Sunday afternoon with us. It was unbelievable that a man so eminent would actually sit in our dining-room, use our knives and forks, and eat our food. Every imperfection in our home and our characters would jump out at him. The Truth had been revealed to man with scientific accuracy—an accuracy we could all test by experiment—and the future course of human development on earth was laid down, finally. And here in Mr Timberlake was a man who had not merely performed many miracles—even, it was said with proper reserve, having twice raised the dead—but who had actually been to Toronto, our headquarters, where this great and revolutionary revelation had first been given.

"This is my nephew," my uncle said, introducing me. "He lives with us. He thinks he thinks, Mr Timberlake, but I tell him he only thinks he does. Ha, ha." My uncle was a humorous man when he was with the great. "He's always on the river," my uncle continued. "I tell him he's got water on the brain. I've been telling Mr Timberlake about you, my boy."

A hand as soft as the best-quality chamois leather took mine. I saw a wide upright man in a double-breasted navy-blue suit. He had a pink square head with very small ears and one of those torpid, enamelled smiles which were said by our enemies to be too common in our sect.

"Why, isn't that just fine!" said Mr Timberlake, who, owing to his contacts with Toronto, spoke with an American accent. "What say we tell your uncle it's funny he thinks he's funny?"

The eyes of Mr Timberlake were direct and colourless. He had the look of a retired merchant captain who had become decontaminated from the sea and had reformed and made money. His defence of me had made me his at once. My doubts vanished. Whatever Mr Timberlake believed must be true, and as I listened

to him at lunch I thought there could be no finer life than his.

"I expect Mr Timberlake's tired after his address," said my aunt.

"Tired?" exclaimed my uncle, brilliant with indignation. "How can Mr Timberlake be tired? Don't let Error in!"

For in our faith the merely inconvenient was just as illusory as a great catastrophe would have been, if you wished to be strict, and Mr Timberlake's presence made us very strict.

I noticed then that, after their broad smiles, Mr Timberlake's lips had the habit of setting into a long depressed sarcastic curve.

"I guess," he drawled, "I guess the Al-mighty must have been tired sometimes, for it says He re-laxed on the seventh day. Say, do you know what I'd like to do this afternoon?" he said, turning to me. "While your uncle and aunt are sleeping off this meal, let's you and me go on the river and get water on the brain. I'll show you how to punt."

Mr Timberlake, I saw to my disappointment, was out to show he understood the young. I saw he was planning a "quiet talk" with me about my problems.

"There are too many people on the river on Sundays," said my uncle uneasily.

"Oh, I like a crowd," said Mr Timberlake, giving my uncle a tough look. "This is the day of rest, you know." He had had my uncle gobbling up every bit of gossip from the sacred city of Toronto all the morning.

My uncle and aunt were incredulous that a man like Mr Timberlake should go out among the blazers and gramophones of the river on a Sunday afternoon. In any other member of our Church they would have thought this sinful.

"Waal, what say?" said Mr Timberlake. I could only murmur.

"That's fixed," said Mr Timberlake. And on came the smile, as simple, vivid and unanswerable as the smile on an advertisement. "Isn't that just fine!"

Mr Timberlake went upstairs to wash his hands. My uncle was deeply offended and shocked, but he could say nothing. He unpinched his glasses.

"A very wonderful man," he said. "So human," he apologized.

"My boy," my uncle said. "This is going to be an experience for you. Hubert Timberlake was making a thousand a year in the insurance business ten years ago. Then he heard of the Purifica-

tion. He threw everything up, just like that. He gave up his job and took up the work. It was a struggle, he told me so himself this morning. 'Many's the time,' he said to me this morning, 'when I wondered where my next meal was coming from.' But the way was shown. He came down from Worcester to London and in two years he was making fifteen hundred a year out of his practice."

To heal the sick by prayer according to the tenets of the Church of the Last Purification was Mr Timberlake's profession.

My uncle lowered his eyes. With his glasses off, the lids were small and uneasy. He lowered his voice too.

"I have told him about your little trouble," my uncle said quietly with emotion. I was burned with shame. My uncle looked up and stuck out his chin confidently.

"He just smiled," my uncle said. "That's all."

Then we waited for Mr Timberlake to come down.

I put on white flannels and soon I was walking down to the river with Mr Timberlake. I felt that I was going with him under false pretences; for he would begin explaining to me the origin of evil and I would have to pretend politely that he was converting me when, already, at the first sight of him, I had believed. A stone bridge, whose two arches were like an owlish pair of eyes gazing up the reach, was close to the landing-stage. I thought what a pity it was the flannelled men and the sunburned girls there did not know I was getting a ticket for *the* Mr Timberlake who had been speaking in the town that very morning. I looked round for him, and when I saw him I was a little startled. He was standing at the edge of the water looking at it with an expression of empty incomprehension. Among the white crowds his air of brisk efficiency had dulled. He looked middle-aged, out of place and insignificant. But the smile switched on when he saw me.

"Ready?" he called. "Fine!"

I had the feeling that inside him there must be a gramophone record going round and round, stopping at that word.

He stepped into the punt and took charge.

"Now I just want you to paddle us over to the far bank," he said, "and then I'll show you how to punt."

Everything Mr Timberlake said still seemed unreal to me. The fact that he was sitting in a punt, of all commonplace material things, was incredible. That he should propose to pole us up the river was terrifying. Suppose he fell into the river? At once I

checked the thought. A leader of our Church under the direct guidance of God could not possibly fall into a river.

The stream is wide and deep in this reach, but on the southern bank there is a manageable depth and a hard bottom. Over the clay banks the willows hang, making their basket-work print of sun and shadow on the water, while under the gliding boats lie cloudy, chloride caverns. The hoop-like branches of the trees bend down until their tips touch the water like fingers making musical sounds. Ahead in midstream, on a day sunny as this one was, there is a path of strong light which is hard to look at unless you half close your eyes, and down this path on the crowded Sundays go the launches with their parasols and their pennants; and also the rowing-boats with their beetle-leg oars, which seem to dig the sunlight out of the water as they rise. Upstream one goes, on and on between the gardens and then between fields kept for grazing. On the afternoon when Mr Timberlake and I went out to settle the question of the origin of evil, the meadows were packed densely with buttercups.

"Now," said Mr Timberlake decisively when I had paddled to the other side. "Now I'll take her."

He got over the seat into the well at the stern.

"I'll just get you clear of the trees," I said.

"Give me the pole," said Mr Timberlake, standing up on the little platform and making a squeak with his boots as he did so. "Thank you, sir. I haven't done this for eighteen years, but I can tell you, brother, in those days I was considered some poler."

He looked around and let the pole slide down through his hands. Then he gave the first difficult push. The punt rocked pleasantly and we moved forward. I sat facing him, paddle in hand, to check any inward drift of the punt.

"How's that, you guys?" said Mr Timberlake, looking round at our eddies and drawing in the pole. The delightful water sished down it.

"Fine," I said. Deferentially I had caught the word.

He went on to his second and his third strokes, taking too much water on his sleeve, perhaps, and uncertain in his steering, which I corrected, but he was doing well.

"It comes back to me," he said. "How am I doing?"

"Just keep her out from the trees," I said.

"The trees?" he said.

"The willows," I said.

"I'll do it now," he said. "How's that? Not quite enough? Well, how's this?"

"Another one," I said. "The current runs strong this side."

"What? More trees?" he said. He was getting hot.

"We can shoot out past them," I said. "I'll ease us over with the paddle."

Mr Timberlake did not like this suggestion.

"No, don't do that. I can manage it," he said. I did not want to offend one of the leaders of our Church, so I put the paddle down; but I felt I ought to have taken him farther along away from the irritation of the trees.

"Of course," I said. "We could go under them. It might be nice."

"I think," said Mr Timberlake, "that would be a very good idea."

He lunged hard on the pole and took us towards the next archway of willow branches.

"We may have to duck a bit, that's all," I said.

"Oh, I can push the branches up," said Mr Timberlake.

"It is better to duck," I said.

We were gliding now quickly towards the arch, in fact I was already under it.

"I think I should duck," I said. "Just bend down for this one."

"What makes the trees lean over the water like this?" asked Mr Timberlake. "Weeping willows—I'll give you a thought there. How Error likes to make us dwell on sorrow. Why not call them *laughing* willows?" discoursed Mr Timberlake as the branch passed over my head.

"Duck," I said.

"Where? I don't see them," said Mr Timberlake, turning round.

"No, your head," I said. "The branch," I called.

"Oh, the branch. This one?" said Mr Timberlake, finding a branch just against his chest, and he put out a hand to lift it. It is not easy to lift a willow branch and Mr Timberlake was surprised. He stepped back as it gently and firmly leaned against him. He leaned back and pushed from his feet. And he pushed too far. The boat went on, I saw Mr Timberlake's boots leave the stern as he took an unthoughtful step backwards. He made a last-minute grasp at a stronger and higher branch, and then, there he hung a

yard above the water, round as a blue damson that is ripe and ready, waiting only for a touch to make it fall. Too late with the paddle and shot ahead by the force of his thrust, I could not save him.

For a full minute I did not believe what I saw; indeed, our religion taught us never to believe what we saw. Unbelieving, I could not move. I gaped. The impossible had happened. Only a miracle, I found myself saying, could save him.

What was most striking was the silence of Mr Timberlake as he hung from the tree. I was lost between gazing at him and trying to get the punt out of the small branches of the tree. By the time I had got the punt out, there were several yards of water between us and the soles of his boots were very near the water as the branch bent under his weight. Boats were passing at the time, but no one seemed to notice us. I was glad about this. This was a private agony. A double chin had appeared on the face of Mr Timberlake and his head was squeezed between his shoulders and his hanging arms. I saw him blink and look up at the sky. His eyelids were pale like a chicken's. He was tidy and dignified as he hung there, the hat was not displaced and the top button of his coat was done up. He had a blue silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. So unperturbed and genteel he seemed that as the tips of his shoes came nearer and nearer to the water, I became alarmed. He could perform what are called miracles. He would be thinking at this moment that only in an erroneous and illusory sense was he hanging from the branch of the tree over six feet of water. He was probably praying one of the closely reasoned prayers of our faith which were more like conversations with Euclid than appeals to God. The calm of his face suggested this. Was he, I asked myself, within sight of the main road, the town Recreation Ground and the landing-stage crowded with people, was he about to re-enact a well-known miracle? I hoped that he was not. I prayed that he was not. I prayed with all my will that Mr Timberlake would not walk upon the water. It was my prayer and not his that was answered.

I saw the shoes dip, the water rise above his ankles and up his socks. He tried to move his grip now to a yet higher branch—he did not succeed—and in making this effort his coat and waistcoat rose and parted from his trousers. One seam of shirt with its pant-loops and brace-tabs broke like a crack across the middle of

Mr Timberlake. It was like a fatal flaw in a statue, an earthquake crack which made the monumental mortal. The last Greeks must have felt as I felt then when they saw a crack across the middle of some statue of Apollo. It was at this moment I realized that the final revelation about man and society on earth had come to nobody and that Mr Timberlake knew nothing at all about the origin of evil.

All this takes long to describe, but it happened in a few seconds as I paddled towards him. I was too late to get his feet on the boat and the only thing to do was to let him sink until his hands were nearer the level of the punt and then to get him to change hand-holds. Then I would paddle him ashore. I did this. Amputated by the water, first a torso, then a bust, then a mere head and shoulders, Mr Timberlake, I noticed, looked sad and lonely as he sank. He was a declining dogma. As the water lapped his collar—for he hesitated to let go of the branch to hold the punt—I saw a small triangle of deprecation and pathos between his nose and the corners of his mouth. The head resting on the platter of water had the sneer of calamity on it, such as one sees in the pictures of a beheaded saint.

"Hold on to the punt, Mr Timberlake," I said urgently. "Hold on to the punt."

He did so.

"Push from behind," he directed in a dry businesslike voice. They were his first words. I obeyed him. Carefully I paddled him towards the bank. He turned and, with a splash, climbed ashore. There he stood, raising his arms and looking at the water running down his swollen suit and making a puddle at his feet.

"Say," said Mr Timberlake coldly, "we let some Error in that time."

How much he must have hated our family.

"I am sorry, Mr Timberlake," I said. "I am most awfully sorry. I should have paddled. It was my fault. I'll get you home at once. Let me wring out your coat and waistcoat. You'll catch your death . . ."

I stopped. I had nearly blasphemed. I had nearly suggested that Mr Timberlake had fallen into the water and that to a man of his age this might be dangerous.

Mr Timberlake corrected me. His voice was impersonal, addressing the laws of human existence rather than myself.

"If God made water it would be ridiculous to suggest He made it capable of harming His creatures. Wouldn't it?"

"Yes," I murmured hypocritically.

"O.K.," said Mr Timberlake. "Let's go."

"I'll soon get you across," I said.

"No," he said. "I mean let's go on. We're not going to let a little thing like this spoil a beautiful afternoon. Where were we going? You spoke of a pretty landing-place farther on. Let's go there."

"But I must take you home. You can't sit there soaked to the skin. It will spoil your clothes."

"Now, now," said Mr Timberlake. "Do as I say. Go on."

There was nothing to be done with him. I held the punt into the bank and he stepped in. He sat like a bursting and sodden bolster in front of me while I paddled. We had lost the pole, of course.

For a long time I could hardly look at Mr Timberlake. He was taking the line that nothing had happened, and this put me at a disadvantage. I knew something considerable had happened. That glaze, which so many of the members of our sect had on their faces and persons, their minds and manners, had been washed off. There was no gleam for me from Mr Timberlake.

"What's the house over there?" he asked. He was making conversation. I had steered into the middle of the river to get him into the strong sun. I saw steam rise from him.

I took courage and studied him. He was a man, I realized, in poor physical condition, unexercised and sedentary. Now the gleam had left him one saw the veined empurpled skin of the stoutish man with a poor heart. I remember he had said at lunch:

"A young woman I know said, 'Isn't it wonderful! I can walk thirty miles in a day without being in the least tired.' I said, 'I don't see that bodily indulgence is anything a member of the Church of the Last Purification should boast about.' "

Yes, there was something flaccid, passive and slack about Mr Timberlake. Bunched in swollen clothes, he refused to take them off. It occurred to me, as he looked with boredom at the water, the passing boats and the country, that he had not been in the country before. That it was something he had agreed to do but wanted to get over quickly. He was totally uninterested. By his

questions—what is that church? Are there any fish in this river? Is that a wireless or a gramophone?—I understood that Mr Timberlake was formally acknowledging a world he did not live in. It was too interesting, too eventful a world. His spirit, inert and preoccupied, was elsewhere in an eventless and immaterial habitation. He was a dull man, duller than any man I have ever known; but his dullness was a sort of earthly deposit left by a being whose diluted mind was far away in the effervescence of metaphysical matters. There was a slightly pettish look on his face as (to himself, of course) he declared he was not wet and that he would not have a heart attack or catch pneumonia.

Mr Timberlake spoke little. Sometimes he squeezed water out of his sleeve. He shivered a little. He watched his steam. I had planned when we set out to go up as far as the lock, but now the thought of another two miles of this responsibility was too much. I pretended I wanted to go only as far as the bend which we were approaching, where one of the richest buttercup meadows was. I mentioned this to him. He turned and looked with boredom at the field. Slowly we came to the bank.

We tied up the punt and we landed.

"Fine," said Mr Timberlake. He stood at the edge of the meadow just as he had stood at the landing-stage—lost, stupefied, uncomprehending.

"Nice to stretch our legs," I said. I led the way into the deep flowers. So dense were the buttercups there was hardly any green. Presently I sat down. Mr Timberlake looked at me and sat down also. Then I turned to him with a last try at persuasion. Respectability, I was sure, was his trouble.

"No one will see us," I said. "This is out of sight of the river. Take off your coat and trousers and wring them out."

Mr Timberlake replied firmly:

"I am satisfied to remain as I am."

"What is this flower?" he asked, to change the subject.

"Buttercup," I said.

"Of course," he replied.

I could do nothing with him. I lay down full length in the sun; and, observing this and thinking to please me, Mr Timberlake did the same. He must have supposed that this was what I had come out in the boat to do. It was only human. He had come out with me, I saw, to show me that he was only human.

But as we lay there I saw the steam still rising. I had had enough.

"A bit hot," I said, getting up.

He got up at once.

"Do you want to sit in the shade?" he asked politely.

"No," I said. "Would you like to?"

"No," he said. "I was thinking of you."

"Let's go back," I said. We both stood up and I let him pass in front of me. When I looked at him again I stopped dead. Mr Timberlake was no longer a man in a navy-blue suit. He was blue no longer. He was transfigured. He was yellow. He was covered with buttercup pollen, a fine yellow paste of it made by the damp, from head to foot.

"Your suit," I said.

He looked at it. He raised his thin eyebrows a little, but he did not smile or make any comment.

The man is a saint, I thought. As saintly as any of those gold-leaf figures in the churches of Sicily. Golden he sat in the punt; golden he sat for the next hour as I paddled him down the river. Golden and bored. Golden as we landed at the town and as we walked up the street back to my uncle's house. There he refused to change his clothes or to sit by a fire. He kept an eye on the time for his train back to London. By no word did he acknowledge the disasters or the beauties of the world. If they were printed upon him, they were printed upon a husk.

Sixteen years have passed since I dropped Mr Timberlake in the river and since the sight of his pant-loops destroyed my faith. I have not seen him since, and to-day I heard that he was dead. He was fifty-seven. His mother, a very old lady with whom he had lived all his life, went into his bedroom when he was getting ready for church and found him lying on the floor in his shirt-sleeves. A stiff collar with the tie half inserted was in one hand. Five minutes before, she told the doctor, she had been speaking to him.

The doctor who looked at the heavy body lying on the single bed saw a middle-aged man, wide rather than stout and with an extraordinarily box-like thick-jawed face. He had got fat, my uncle told me, in later years. The heavy liver-coloured cheeks were like the chaps of a hound. Heart disease, it was plain, was

the cause of the death of Mr Timberlake. In death the face was lax, even coarse and degenerate. It was a miracle, the doctor said, that he had lived as long. Any time during the last twenty years the smallest shock might have killed him.

I thought of our afternoon on the river. I thought of him hanging from the tree. I thought of him, indifferent and golden, in the meadow. I understood why he had made for himself a protective, sedentary blandness, an automatic smile, a collection of phrases. He kept them on like the coat after his ducking. And I understood why—though I had feared it all the time we were on the river—I understood why he did not talk to me about the origin of evil. He was honest. The ape was with us. The ape that merely followed me was already inside Mr Timberlake eating out his heart.

Many Are Disappointed

HEADS down to the wind from the hidden sea, the four men were cycling up a deserted road in the country. Bert, who was the youngest, dreamed:

"You get to the pub, and there's a girl at the pub, a dark girl with bare arms and bare legs in a white frock, the daughter of the house, or an orphan—maybe it's better she should be an orphan—and you say something to her, or better still, you don't say anything to her—she just comes and puts her arms round you, and you can feel her skin through her frock and she brings you some beer and the other chaps aren't there and the people don't say anything except laugh and go away, because it's all natural and she doesn't have a baby. Same at the next place, same anywhere, different place, different girl, or same girl—same girl always turning up, always waiting. Dunno how she got there. Just slips along without you knowing it and waiting like all those songs . . ."

And there the pub was. It stood on the crown of the long hill, straight ahead of them, a small red brick house with outbuildings and a single chimney trailing out smoke against the strong white light which seemed to be thrown up by great reflectors from the hidden sea.

"There's our beer, Mr Blake," shouted Sid on his pink racing-tyres, who was the first to see it, the first to see everything. The four men glanced up.

Yes, there's our beer, they said. Our ruddy beer. They had been thinking about it for miles. A pub at the cross-roads, a pub where the old Roman road crossed this road that went on to the land's end, a funny place for a pub, but a pub all right, the only pub for ten miles at Harry's ruddy Roman road, marked on the map which stuck out of the backside pocket of Harry's breeches. Yes, that was the pub, and Ted, the oldest and the married one, slacked on the long hill and said all he hoped was that the Romans had left a drop in the bottom of the barrel for posterity.

When they had left in the morning there had been little wind. The skylarks were over the fields and the sun itself was like one of

their steel wheels flashing in the sky. Sid was the first, but Harry with the stubborn red neck and the close dull fair curls was the leader. In the week he sat in the office making the plan. He had this mania for Roman roads. "Ask our Mr Newton," they said, "the man with the big head and the brain." They had passed through the cream-walled villages and out again to pick up once more the singing of the larks; and then cloud had covered the sun like a grey hand, west of Handleyford the country had emptied and it was astonishing to hear a bird. Reeds were in the small meadows. Hedges crawled uncut and there had been no villages, only long tablelands of common and bald wiry grass for sheep and the isolated farm with no ivy on the brick.

Well, they were there at last. They piled their bicycles against the wall of the house. They were shy before these country places. They waited for Ted. He was walking the last thirty yards. They looked at the four windows with their lace curtains and the varnished door. There was a chicken in the road and no sound but the whimper of the telegraph wire on the hill. In an open barn was a cart tipped down, its shaft white with the winter's mud, and last year's swallow nests, now empty, were under the eaves. Then Ted came, and when he had piled his bicycle, they read the black sign over the door. "Tavern", it said. A funny old-fashioned word, Ted said, that you didn't often see.

"Well," Sid said, "a couple of pints all round?"

They looked to Harry. He always opened doors, but this door was so emphatically closed that he took off his fur gauntlet first and knocked before he opened it. The four men were surprised to see a woman standing behind the door, waiting there as if she had been listening to them. She was a frail, drab woman, not much past thirty, in a white blouse that drooped low over her chest.

"Good morning," said Sid. "This the bar?"

"The bar?" said the woman timidly. She spoke in a flat wondering voice and not in the sing-song of this part of the country.

"Yes, the bar," Ted said. "It says 'Tavern,' " he said, nodding up at the notice.

"Oh, yes," she said, hesitating. "Come in. Come in here."

She showed them not into the bar but into a sitting-room. There was a bowl of tomatoes in the window and a notice said "Teas".

The four men were tall and large beside her in the little room, and she gazed up at them as if she feared they would burst its walls. And yet she was pleased. She was trying to smile.

"This is on me," Sid said. "Mild and bitter four times."

"O.K., Mr Blake," Ted said. "Bring me my beer."

"But let's get into the bar," said Bert.

Seeing an armchair, Ted sank into it and now the woman was reassured. She succeeded in smiling, but she did not go out of the room. Sid looked at her and her smile was vacant and faint like the smile fading on an old photograph. Her hair was short, an impure yellow, and the pale skin of her face and her neck and her breast seemed to be moist as if she had just got out of bed. The high strong light of this place drank all colour from her.

"There isn't a bar," she said. "This isn't a public-house. They call it the Tavern, but it isn't a tavern by rights."

Very anxiously she raised her hands to her blouse.

"What!" they exclaimed. "Not a pub! Here, Harry, it's marked on your map." They were dumbfounded and angry.

"What you mean, don't sell beer?" they said.

Their voices were very loud.

"Yes," said Harry. "Here it is. See? Inn."

He put the map before her face accusingly.

"You don't sell beer?" said Bert. He looked at the pale-blue-veined chest of the woman.

"No," she said. She hesitated. "Many are disappointed," she said, and she spoke like a child reciting a piece without knowing its meaning. He lowered his eyes.

"You bet they ruddy well are," said Ted from the chair.

"Where is the pub?" said Sid.

She put out her hand and a little girl came into the room and clung close to her mother. Now she felt happier.

"My little girl," she said.

She was a tiny, frail child with yellow hair and pale blue eyes like her mother's. The four men smiled and spoke more quietly because of the resemblance between the woman and her child.

"Which way did you come?" she asked, and her hand moving over the child's hair got courage from the child. "Handleyford?" she said. "That's it. It's ten miles. The Queen's Arms, Handleyford, the way you came. That's the nearest pub."

"My God!" said Bert. "What a country!"

"The Queen's Arms," said Ted stupefied.

He remembered it. They were passing through Handleyford. He was the oldest, a flat wide man in loose clothes, loose in the chin too, with watery rings under his eyes and a small golden sun of baldness at the back of his head. "Queen's Arms" he had called. "Here, what's the ruddy game?" But the others had grinned back at him. When you drop back to number four on the hills it comes back to you: they're single, nothing to worry about, you're married and you're forty. What's the hurry? Ease up, take what you can get. "Queen's Arms"—he remembered looking back. The best things are in the past.

"Well, that's that!" said Sid.

"Queen's Arms, Harry," Ted said.

And Bert looked at the woman. "Let's go on," he said fiercely. She was not the woman he had expected. Then he blushed and turned away from the woman.

She was afraid they were going, and in a placating voice she said, "I do teas."

Sid was sitting on the arm of a chair and the child was gazing at a gold ring he wore on his little finger. He saw the child was gazing and he smiled.

"What's wrong with tea?" Sid said.

"Ask the man with the brain," said Ted. "Ask the man with the map."

Harry said, "If you can't have beer, you'd better take what you can get, Mr Richards."

"Tea," nodded Sid to the woman. "Make it strong."

The woman looked at Sid as if he had performed a miracle.

"I'll get you tea," she said eagerly. "I always do teas for people." She spoke with delight as if a bell had suddenly tinkled inside her. Her eyes shone. She would get them tea, she said, and bread and butter, but no eggs, because the man had not been that morning, and no ham. It was too early, she said, for ham. "But there are tomatoes," she said. And then, like a child, "I put them in the window so as people can see."

"O.K.," Sid said. "Four teas."

She did not move at once, but still, like a shy child, stood watching them, waiting for them to be settled and fearful that they would not stay. But at last she put out her hand to the child and hurried out to the kitchen.

"Well, Mr Blake," said Ted, "there's a ruddy sell."

"Have a gasper, Mr Richards," said Sid.

"Try my lighter," said Ted.

He clicked the lighter, but no flame came.

"Wrong number," said Ted. "Dial O and try again." A steak, said Sid, had been his idea. A couple of pints just to ease the passage and then some real drinking, Ted said. But Bert was drumming on a biscuit-tin and was looking inside. There was nothing in it. "Many," said Bert, "are disappointed."

They looked at the room. There were two new treacle-coloured armchairs. There was a sofa with a pattern of black ferns on it. The new plush was damp and sticky to the hands from the air of the hidden sea. There was a gun-metal fender and there was crinkled green paper in the fireplace. A cupboard with a glass door was empty except for the lowest shelf. On that was a thick book called *The Marvels of Science*.

The room was cold. They thought in the winter it must be damn' cold. They thought of the ten drizzling miles to Handleyford.

They listened to the cold clatter of the plates in the kitchen and the sound of the woman's excited voice and the child's. There was the bare linoleum on the floor and the chill glass of the window. Outside was the road with blown sand at the edges and, beyond a wall, there were rows of cabbages, then a bit of field and the expressionless sky. There was no sound on the road. They—it occurred to them—had been the only sound on that road for hours.

The woman came in with a cup and then with a plate. The child brought a plate and the woman came in with another cup. She looked in a dazed way at the men, amazed that they were still there. It seemed to Ted, who was married, that she didn't know how to lay a table. "And now I've forgotten the sugar," she laughed. Every time she came into the room she glanced at Bert timidly and yet pityingly, because he was the youngest and had been the most angry. He lowered his eyes and avoided her look. But to Ted she said, "That's right, you make yourselves comfortable," and at Sid she smiled because he had been the kindest. At Harry she did not look at all.

She was very startled then when he stood at the door and said, "Where's this Roman road?"

She was in the kitchen. She told him the road by the white gate and showed him from the doorway of the house.

"There he goes," said Sid at the window. "He's looking over the gate."

They waited. The milk was put on the table. The woman came in at last with the bread and butter and the tea.

"He'll miss his tea next," Ted said.

"Well," Ted said, when Harry came back. "See any Romans?"

"It's just grass," Harry said. "Nothing on it." He stared in his baffled, bull-necked way.

"No beer and no Romans," Ted said.

The woman, who was standing there, smiled. In a faltering voice, wishing to make them happy, she said:

"We don't often get no Romans here."

"Oh God!" Bert laughed very loudly and Ted shook with laughter too. Harry stared.

"Don't take any notice of them, missus," Sid said. And then to them: "She means gypsies."

"That come with brooms," she said, bewildered by their laughter, wondering what she had done.

When she had gone and had closed the door, Bert and Ted touched their heads with their fingers and said she was dippy, but Sid told them to speak quietly.

Noisily they had drawn up their chairs and were eating and drinking. Ted cut up tomatoes, salted them, and put them on his bread. They were good for the blood, he told them, and Harry said they reckoned at home his grandad got the cancer he died of from eating tomatoes day after day. Bert, with his mouth full, said he'd read somewhere that tea was the most dangerous drink on earth. Then the child came in with a paper and said her mother had sent it. Sid looked at the door when it closed again.

"Funny thing," he said. "I think I've seen that woman before."

That, they said, was Sid's trouble. He'd seen too many girls before.

He was a lanky man with a high forehead and a Hitler moustache, and his lips lay over his mouth as if they were kissing the air or whispering to it. He was a dark, harsh-looking, cocksure man, but with a gentle voice, and it was hard to see his eyes under his strong glasses. His lashes were long and his lids often half lowered, which gave him an air of seriousness and shyness. But

he stuck his thumbs in his waistcoat and stuck out his legs to show his loud check stockings and he had that ring on his finger. "Move that up a couple and he'd be spliced," they said. "Not me," he said. "Look at Ted." A man with no ideals, Bert thought, a man whose life was hidden behind the syrup-thick lens of his glasses. Flash Sid. See the typists draw themselves up, tilt back their heads and get their hands ready to keep him off. Not a man with ideals. See them watch his arms and his hands, see them start tapping hard on the typewriter keys and pretending to be busy when he leant over to tell them a story. And then, when he was gone, see them peep through the Enquiry window to watch where he went, quarrel about him and dawdle in the street when the office closed, hoping to see him.

"Well," said Harry when they had cleared the table and got out the map. Sid said:

"You gen'lemen settle it. I'll go and fix her up."

Sid's off, they said. First on the road, always leading, getting the first of the air, licking the cream off everything.

He found her in the kitchen and he had to lower his head because of the ceiling. She was sitting drably at the table, which was covered with unwashed plates and the remains of a meal. There were unwashed clothes on the backs of the chairs and there was a man's waistcoat. The child was reading a comic paper at the table and singing in a high small voice.

A delicate stalk of neck, he thought, and eyes like the pale wild scabious you see in the ditches.

Four shillings, she said, would that be too much?

She put her hand nervously to her breast.

"That's all right," Sid said and put the money in her hand. It was coarsened by work. "We cleared up everything," he said.

"Don't get many people, I expect," he said.

"Not this time of year."

"A bit lonely," he said.

"Some think it is," she said.

"How long have you been here?" he said.

"Only three years. It seems," she said with her continual wonder, "longer."

"I thought it wasn't long," Sid said. "I thought I seen you somewhere. You weren't in . . . in Horsham, were you?"

"I come from Ashford," she said.

"Ashford," he said. "I knew you weren't from these parts."

She brightened, and she was fascinated because he took off his glasses and she saw the deep serious shadows of his eyes and the pale drooping of the naked lids. The eyes looked tired and as if they had seen many things and she was tired too.

"I bin ill," she said. Her story came irresistibly to her lips. "The doctor told us to come here. My husband gave up his job and everything. Things are different here. The money's not so good. . . ." Her voice quickened, "But I try to make it up with the teas."

She paused, trying to read from his face if she should say any more. She seemed to be standing on the edge of another country. The pale blue eyes seemed to be the pale sky of a far-away place where she had been living.

"I nearly died," she said. She was a little amazed by this fact.

"You're O.K. now," Sid said.

"I'm better," she said. "But it seems I get lonely now I'm better."

"You want your health, but you want a bit company," Sid said.

"My husband says, 'You got your health, what you want company for?'"

She put this to Sid in case her husband was not right, but she picked up her husband's waistcoat from the chair and looked over its buttons because she felt, timorously, she had been disloyal to her husband.

"A woman wants company," said Sid.

He looked shy now to her, like Bert, the young one; but she was most astonished that someone should agree with her and not her husband.

Then she flushed and put out her hand to the little girl, who came to her mother's side, pressing against her. The woman felt safer and raised her eyes and looked more boldly at him.

"You and your friends going far?"

He told her. She nodded, counting the miles as if she were coming along with them. And then Sid felt a hand touch his.

It was the child's hand touching the ring on his finger.

"Ha!" laughed Sid. "You saw that before." He was quick. The child was delighted with his quickness. The woman put the waistcoat down at once. He took off the ring and put it in the

palm of his hand and bent down so that his head nearly brushed the woman's arm. "That's lucky," he said. "Here," he said. He slipped the ring on the child's little finger. "See," he said. "Keeps me out of mischief. Keep a ring on your little finger and you'll be lucky."

The child looked at him without belief.

"Here y'are," he said, taking back the ring. "Your mother wants it," he said, winking at the woman. "She's got hers on the wrong finger. Little one luck, big one trouble."

She laughed and she blushed and her eyes shone. He moved to the door and her pale lips pouted a little. Then, taking the child by the hand, she hurried over to him as if both of them would cling to him. Excitedly, avidly, they followed him to the other room.

"Come on, Mr Blake," said Ted. The three others rose to their feet.

The child clung to her mother's hand and danced up and down. She was in the midst of them. They zipped up their jackets, stubbed their cigarettes, folded up the map. Harry put on his gauntlets. He stared at the child and then slowly took off his glove and pulled out a sixpence. "No," murmured Ted, the married man, but the child was too quick.

They went out of the room and stood in the road. They stretched themselves in the open air. The sun was shining now on the fields. The woman came to the door to see them. They took their bicycles from the wall, looked up and down the road and then swung on. To the sea, the coast road and then perhaps a girl, some girl. But the others were shouting.

"Good-bye," they called. "Good-bye."

And Bert, the last, remembered then to wave good-bye too, and glanced up at the misleading notice. When they were all together, heads down to the wind, they turned again. "Good God," they said. The woman and the child had come out into the middle of the road hand in hand and their arms were still raised and their hands were fluttering under the strong light of that high place. It was a long time before they went back into the house.

And now for a pub, a real pub, the three men called to Harry. Sid was ahead on his slim pink tyres getting the first of the new wind, with the ring shining on his finger.

Passing the Ball

TWO years ago when I had finished at the hospital and was waiting for a grant to come through, I put in a month as a locum for a country doctor.

When I first went to see him, the doctor switched on his desk lamp, turned it to shine full in my face and said in a rough voice, as if he were finishing a mouthful of hay:

"How old are you?" he said. "If I may ask? Married? Do you hunt, I mean where were you at school?"

He began pulling out the drawers of his desk one by one and, shutting them recklessly with a number of bangs, rang for his dispenser and said something to her about a horse. After this he leaned forward and fell to tapping the side of his tin wastepaper-basket with a riding-crop in slow, trotting time. His look was uninterested.

"Yes, yes, yes," he said lazily from the saddle. "We don't want a lot of your new-fangled ideas here. This isn't the usual kind of practice. The man I have here has got to be a gentleman. You can hand out your penicillin and your M. & B. You can put the whole parish in an iron lung, fill them with American drugs—I know that's the modern idea—but it's my experience of forty years of doctoring that a gentleman's worth the lot. Have a drink? Do you know the Fobhams?"

I could see up the doctor's meaty nose and underneath his chin when he raised it to utter this name in the voice of one who had suddenly put on Court dress. By nature Dr Ray was a man of disguises, and a new one with every sentence. Two whiskies stabilized him. A heavy, guilty blush came down from the middle of his head, enlarged his ears and went below his collar. His hands became confidential; one of them was put on my shoulder; his voice lowered, and if shrewdness was in one blue eye as sharp as a pellet, the other became watery with anxiety.

"What it boils down to, old man, is this," he said, sneering at himself. "Half the village at the surgery door thinking they're going to die because they've cut their fingers, and threatening to write to the Ministry of Health because you won't issue free

crutches and corsets. The usual thing. The day's work, eh? All in it. Forget it. The important thing is this."

"Yes?" I said.

"I'm telling you." He sharpened. "The only people who count here are fifteen families: the private patients. That's where the living is. I've been here most of my life and I've made quite a nice thing out of it. I don't want it spoiled. They're the people to watch. I get a call from them—I go at once. I don't want anyone coming in here and ruining it with a lot of new-fangled stuff."

"Frankly," he added, "I can't afford it."

The doctor stepped back, opened his mouth wide and felt his face in several places.

"I think you're the right sort of chap," he said. "Have another drink? There are only three illnesses in this place—bridge, horses and marriage—you're not married? Glad to hear it. And there's only one medicine: tact. In any case," he said, "it's August. Everyone's away."

In that month the woods in the small estates seemed to lie under glass. The cottages fluffed like hens in the sun; the large houses had a sedate and waxen gleam. The air seemed to hang, brocaded, from the enormous trees. I drove on my rounds from one tropical garden to the next. Men like cock pheasants drove out of Georgian houses in their shooting-brakes: their women's voices went off like the alarm call of game. In the rivers, large, clever trout, living like rentiers on their capital, put themselves at the disposal of the highly taxed fishermen on the banks of the beautiful river. There was the warm bread smell of the harvest in the fields and of tweed, roses and tobacco in the bars. In their houses, most of them built in the eighteenth century, the fifteen families were hidden. There Mrs Gluck ordered more honeysuckle so that next year it would climb into *every* bedroom; there the Admiral did his jigsaw puzzle and the young Hookhams came down from the week's climb towards the Cabinet in London; two miles off, Lord Fobham, wearing plimsolls, let off a wing of his house at a tremendous rent and spent his evenings stiffening himself with gin in the company of Mr Calverley, a cultivated alcoholic who often—I was to discover—lost his clothes and had slept, against the will of their owners, in most of the houses round about. Mrs Luke sat moustached and quietly chewing on her fortune in a house famous for its monkey puzzles. At Upley was

the financier Hicks, who had shot the head off the stone pelican on the gate of his drive; in the mill house near the water meadows was Mrs Scarborough ("Pansy") Flynn, three times divorced, nesting like a moorhen and listening for the voices of men. And then there were the Bassilleros, who brought into the country an odour of Claridge's; indeed, his violet complexion gave "Jock" Bassillero's face the surprised appearance of one cut out of a hotel carpet and seen in fluorescent light.

I have conveyed an impression of tropical luxury in my account of this August, but in fact it was the coldest August for many years. We had influenza in the village. The tropical quality came from the fifteen families; at a certain stage, portions of civilization reach a Tahitan condition and are hot enough to be moved to a climate less mild than the English one; indeed, there was a good deal of talk among the fifteen families of emigrating to Jamaica. I found this tropical tendency almost at once. A few days after I had taken over from the doctor, there was a party at the Hicks's.

I heard there had been a party when Mr Calverley was brought into the surgery. He had a cut on top of his head and was supported by a few friends. Mrs Bassillero was among them.

"What have you been up to?" I said, as I dressed the wound.

Mr Calverley was wearing no collar and no jacket and smelled strongly of ivy. He had curling black hair and looked gentle, savage and appealing.

"The gutter fell on him," said one of the women. "Is it deep? Is it all right? Poor Tommy. He was climbing after Pansy Flynn."

The sympathy annoyed Calverley. He knocked the dressing out of my hand, jumped up and drove his friends back to the door.

"I'll kill you all," he said.

Hicks the financier, a man who illustrated the Theory of Conspicuous Waste by the habit of dropping the first letter of many of his words, said:

"'Hut up, Tommy. 'It down. 'Ook at Ray, he's making 'ight of it."

"That's not Ray," someone said. "Ray's on holiday."

"'Ood 'od", said Hicks. "'An't have quacks here."

I had got Calverley back in the chair.

"'Ight poison us. State 'octor? No?"

Calverley looked up at me with a quiet, intimate, head-hunting smile.

"I'll kill you," he said to me in a soft and cultivated voice.

Mrs Bassillero started talking loudly to someone on the other side of the surgery about the sexual life of a couple called Pip and Dottie.

I found Calverley's tie on my carpet the next morning.

In the next two or three days I heard odds and ends about the Hicks's party. Calverley had got half-way up the ivy at the side of the house. Hicks had put his foot through his drawing-room window. One or two cars were having their wings straightened at the garage, and Lady Fobham, to whom I was called, had been in the lily pond.

And then there was a telephone call from the Bassilleros. I was out on my rounds and the message followed me from house to house. It was half-past twelve before I got to the Bassilleros. Mr Bassillero (the message said) had had "one of his attacks".

The Bassilleros lived in a house built in 1740. I noticed, as I went in, paintings of several famous dead horses, a great many medals. With its white and its gold, the house was a pretty example of the architecture of the period. A Spanish servant let me into a wide hall, where a large naval battle was going on in a gilt frame on the wall opposite the door. It was a picture filled with impudent little waves, clouds and sails, like Mrs Bassillero's blue-grey curls. She came to me wearing a smart, sand-coloured version of the county's tweed uniform. She walked with the artificial jerk of the hips taught to débutantes in her time. One eyelid was lowered in a little, trained, quarter-wink. She was five feet high, broad-chinned, thin-limbed and narrow like a boy.

"I had a message at the surgery . . ." I began. Mrs Bassillero had a pretty voice and the seductive, abrupt, bad manners of her generation which set it off.

"I rang for Ray."

"He's on holiday," I said.

"That's a body blow," she said. "We always have Ray." She stood there, her violet eyes picking me over, preparing to haggle with me, do a deal or ask me what I bet her that she could not get Ray back at once from the other end of the earth, if she wished to.

"You're using Ray's car," she accused me. "He said he'd lend

it me." Mrs Bassillero put her head on one side to see if this "try on" would succeed.

"It belongs to the practice," I said.

Mrs Bassillero gave the faintest jerk to her head, and one eyebrow moved, as if she were shaking off a very close bullet.

"Hard luck on me," she said.

"I am sorry about Mr Bassillero," I said. "May I see him? What is the trouble?"

Mrs Bassillero considered me and hummed. Then again came that jerk of the head, shaking off the bad news: the bad news was myself.

"I rang up to ask Ray to luncheon," she said. "I forgot he's away." And then, doing a deal again, "Will you stay?"

"I was told Mr Bassillero had had an attack," I said.

"He has," she said. "He's lost his voice again."

"He can't speak," she said. Her direct eyes now were made to mist with skilful appeal.

"I had better look at his throat," I said.

Mrs Bassillero suddenly laughed like a man.

"If you really want to," she said. "You don't understand. What a bore Ray isn't here! When I say he can't speak, I mean he *won't* speak. We're not on speaking terms. We had a row after the party at Hicks's. You must stay to luncheon. There's no one to pass the ball. Everyone's away. We always get Ray when my husband's voice goes. You'll stay? Now I will take you to my husband."

She trod out of the room slowly like a cat, and I followed her to the door of her husband's study.

"Look at his throat, Doctor," she said loudly, as she opened the door.

Mr Bassillero was a short person, too. He was considering his fishing-rods and did not look up at once when I came into the room.

"Damn glad you're here, Doctor," he said. "Trouble."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

Then Mr Bassillero looked up and said, "Who are you?"

Tact, I remembered, was the thing. I did not say Mrs Bassillero had sent for me. Mr Bassillero had that kind of dark handsomeness which is fixed like a pain to one aspect of a luxurious head. He was only about forty-five, but he seemed to have receded into the

loud pattern of his clothes. He was wearing a plum-coloured tweed suit with green lines squared on it, a design that made him nearly invisible in any well-furnished room. His violet cheeks had been embossed on him twenty-five years ago. Mr Bassillero, I was to find out, had undergone a severe cure for drinking. His cure had left him stupefied. His main occupation during the day, I soon gathered, was to consider whether he would change his clothes. He was a man who knew he was dressed for something—but for what escaped his mind.

“I think I shall go in and change,” was one of his frequent sentences. Or, “I shall put on my other boots and go down to the village.”

Mr Bassillero was looking at my worn grey suit.

“Mrs Bassillero has very kindly asked me to luncheon,” I said.

“We usually have Ray,” said Bassillero. “Always passes the ball. Understands women. Can cap anything. She,” Mr Bassillero pointed a neutral finger at the door, “better warn you—has lost her voice. Can’t speak.”

“It is damp weather for August,” I said.

“Yes, put on a burberry this morning,” Mr Bassillero agreed. “Cold enough for a coat. Difficult speaking to someone who doesn’t answer, difficult to keep it up. We’ve got Spanish servants—never stop.”

Mr Bassillero had talked a lot, but now his supply of words went. We stared at a silver dog on his desk. We were saved by one of the Spaniards calling us to luncheon.

We went into a room so high and large that the Bassilleros were like a pair of mere anemones at the bottom of a tank. I, on the contrary, had the sensation of growing uncomfortably tall; one of my difficulties during the meal was a dread that I would shoot up and hit the ceiling.

“If you will ask my husband he will, I am sure, give you something to drink,” Mrs Bassillero said as we sat down.

“I wonder if I could get you to trouble *her* to pass us down the bread. Spanish servants always forget something,” said Mr Bassillero.

I had become wired in as a telephone for Mr and Mrs Bassillero. I found myself bobbing in my chair from right to left, collecting one set of remarks, passing them on and then collecting and disposing again. I found myself very soon telling Mr Bassillero that

his wife was going to London on the evening train. I found myself telling her that Mr Bassillero was going to Scotland. Mr Bassillero told me he had found "some damn Spanish thing" in his cutlets; Mrs Bassillero asked *if* I had just bought a new motor mower, *would* I allow it to be left out in the rain, considering the price of things now? I sat trying to make myself shorter. We had arrived, I thought, at last at a safe topic: the weather. As I have said, it was a cold August. The Bassilleros had put on their heating. Mr Bassillero eased now that we had returned to his favourite, indeed his only, subject.

"Thought of changing my shirt this morning," he said. "Putting on a warmer one. Not a single warm shirt in my drawer."

If the Bassilleros could not speak, they could, of course, hear.

"I imagine, Doctor, when you can't find a shirt where you are lodging, you go to the linen-room or you go to Mrs Thing?" said Mrs Bassillero.

Mr Bassillero asked me if I did not agree that in a properly run house, as my lodgings probably were, there was a place for everything and you did not have to turn the house upside down to get it. Not only that, he said, my Mrs Thing probably spoke English.

Mr Bassillero spoke mainly to the salt at his end of the table; Mrs Bassillero looked at a large picture of a horse called Bendigo which had won the Jubilee Stakes in the '80s.

Mrs Bassillero said, "I'm sure you speak foreign languages well."

A group of Cupids above my head seemed to be beckoning me up. I fought my way down to the subject of the weather.

"It is clouding over again," I said.

The attempt did not help us.

"In any case," said Mrs Bassillero, "I'm sure you never change into warm shirts at this time of the year. You wear a light summer overcoat."

"I haven't got one," I said.

"What?" said Mr Bassillero.

I repeated the sentence to his end of the table.

"Good God," he said.

"Did you lose it?" said Mrs Bassillero with sharp interest.

"Some fellow pinch it?" asked Mr Bassillero.

For a moment they were almost united. They even looked at each other for a second, then their glances skidded away.

"No, I just haven't got one," I said.

Mr Bassillero sank back, like an invalid, into his handsomeness. He looked at me with total unbelief.

"I thought you were going to say," he said bitterly, "some fellow took it. Tom Calverley took mine at the Hicks's on Saturday. I took his. Only thing to do."

"Men are too extraordinary, Doctor," said Mrs Bassillero. "You are no taller than my husband, but I'm sure you wouldn't be such a fool as to come home in Tommy Calverley's overcoat. He's six foot three. I mean, right down to your boots. Polar. I mean, surely you'd pick one your own size. Even after a party."

"Calverley took mine. I took his. Fair's fair," said Bassillero, speaking to me.

"On a cold night," I said.

"Two in the morning," said Bassillero.

"I see you are not on my side, Doctor," said Mrs Bassillero, giving the shake to her grey curls.

"After a party I might come away in mink," I said. I risked a lie: "I once did," I said. I looked hopefully at both of them to see if we were happier now.

Mrs Bassillero had a gay but humourless manner; a joke about mink was unacceptable.

"What an *odd* thing to do," she said coldly.

I had offended Mr Bassillero too; he looked at me with distaste. In mixing up men's and women's clothes, I had been sartorially disagreeable. He rang off, so to say, and spoke to himself. Mrs Bassillero said to me in her short, crushing style:

"I hope you returned the coat."

"Of course," I said.

"Because I do think if one wilfully takes someone else's coat one ought to return it, don't you? Or not? I don't know about men. I mean, there's Tommy Calverley's ridiculous coat hanging up in the cloakroom still, I expect you saw it?"

I don't like being snubbed. "I thought of selling it," I said.

Mr Bassillero looked up. His colour had become a darker violet.

"Sold it!" exclaimed Mr Bassillero.

"No," I calmed him. "I was speaking to Mrs Bassillero about a coat I took."

"Oh," said Mr Bassillero. "If Tom Calverley's sold my coat..."

Mr Bassillero was unable to go on with this idea. He looked at me suspiciously: it appeared to him I was trying to get him away from the ground on which he was making his stand.

"Took my coat and hadn't the grace to bring it back," he said to me.

Mr Bassillero became magnetic.

"Daren't," he said. "Daren't bring it back."

There was a long silence at the table. At either end of it the Bassilleros had receded into the events of the Hicks's party. Mr Bassillero was the first to speak, and his voice seemed to come from three days away.

"Wouldn't pay him either," he said.

He glanced at the window and the sky, looked at his jacket, wondering if he would change again.

"Knows what he left in his pocket," he said.

Mrs Bassillero's head made a small dodge. She got up.

"Shall we have coffee next door?" she said. She walked ahead and opened the door. Bassillero held me back.

"You a married man, Doctor?" he said.

"No," I said.

"Neither is Ray," he said.

Mr Bassillero looked lost, as if by some misfortune he was the only married man in the world.

"Are you coming?" called Mrs Bassillero.

"Engaged?" said Bassillero, recovering hope.

"No," I said.

Mr Bassillero thought this over.

"It makes no odds," said Mr Bassillero. "A fellow takes your coat, eh? You take his? All right. You find your wife's gloves in his pocket. Now, what do you do? Where are you, I mean to say—what? You've got a scientific brain—explain it. Eh? See what I mean?"

I passed into the drawing-room, where Mrs Bassillero's thin legs looked like scissors and one cutting and racketing knee appeared from under her skirt as she sat pouring the coffee.

"Do sit down, you look so unsteady," said Mrs Bassillero as I took my coffee. She poured out a cup for her husband and turned her back to him when he took it.

"I *do* think," she said in a gush, turning to me. "I *do* think it's too extraordinary about men. I mean the way they have become

humble in the last two hundred years. I mean, they used to dress up to please women and to be admired by them; hours doing their hair and their faces. Now it's the other way on. I do think it's sweet of you to give it all up. So self-effacing. I mean, you all dress alike, and take each other's clothes."

She paused. Not only her face, but the hard-headed knee, seemed to be advancing at me. The dealer's voice in her suddenly came out.

"After a couple of martinis, when you've got one eye on the man who is making a pass at you and the other ripping around for somewhere to put your gloves, one has no idea which coat is which. You stick them anywhere. They all look alike. One might be married to anybody."

When she said this, Mrs Bassillero's pleasant violet eye gave its trained quarter-wink.

"That, at any rate, is the story you've got to sell for me to Mr Bassillero," she appeared to be signalling.

I saw that this was the crisis; this was where Ray, having "passed the ball" for half an hour, would now rise to the occasion and administer his medicine. What would he do? Would he distract Mr Bassillero with some anecdote about a tailor, a horse or a fish; or entangle Mrs Bassillero in some social crossword puzzle about the first Fobham marriage? To show how unsuited my mind was to the situation—I tried, as they say, to get at the facts and to reconstruct the incident. I got back to the scene in my surgery on the night of the Hicks's party. Who was there? What were they wearing? I went over the people one by one and then I saw Calverley sitting in my chair.

"Good heavens," I said. "I've just remembered something. You know when Calverley came to my surgery that night, he wasn't wearing an overcoat. Actually, he hadn't even got a jacket on."

I didn't know what Mrs Bassillero's relations with Mr Calverley were, but Mrs Bassillero's startled eyes suddenly stared into a scene which neither Mr Bassillero nor I knew about; she was too taken aback to wink.

"I see," she said. "You mean he hadn't taken my husband's coat at all?"

"Or," I said, making it worse, "he'd probably left it somewhere."

She looked at me scientifically in a way that suggested that I was the kind of man who couldn't keep his mouth shut even if it were stitched. Then she gave the small flick of her head, and turning to her husband she spoke to him directly for the first time.

"That is why he hasn't brought it back," she said. "It's at Pansy Flynn's. . . ."

Into that name Mrs Bassillero might have been pouring machine-gun fire.

"Not the first time your coat has been there, my dear," she followed up. "It probably walked there by itself, it knows the way."

The astonishment in Mr Bassillero's face was chiefly that of a man who finds himself, through no fault of his own, suddenly on speaking terms with his wife again. He could not believe it. Then, he slowly saw the innuendo. He appeared to be about to shoot back at his wife; indeed, his arms moved nervously. I suppose he felt he was not dressed in the right clothes for uttering a domestic sarcasm, for all he did was suddenly to pull down his two waistcoat ends with a force which made his collar stand out.

And then I had the only sensible idea that occurred to me during the luncheon party.

"I'm passing there"—I did not say where—"on my way to the surgery. I will pick up your coat for you, Mr Bassillero. In fact, if you like to give me Mr Calverley's, I will make the exchange. I'll drop yours in for you this evening."

I looked from one Bassillero to the other, and I saw that, having done my worst, I was beginning to triumph. I saw the embarrassment of two people who are about to lose the object of a very satisfying quarrel. Reluctantly Mr Bassillero saw his grievance go; suspiciously Mrs Bassillero considered the peace. Presently they fell into an argument about who was going to London and who to Scotland, and when. It ended where so many of the discussions of the Bassilleros must have done, on the central situation of their marriage; that Mr Bassillero couldn't go to Scotland, indeed anywhere else, until he could freely decide which coat to wear, and that Mrs Bassillero never made up her mind until she saw what he was doing first.

It is pleasant to do good to people. As I put Calverley's coat in the car and drove off from the Bassilleros, I felt that Dr Ray would congratulate me. I had been a telephone for the Bassilleros,

I had been the catalyst, I had administered "the only medicine". Calverley's coat, like Calverley disembodied, sagged beside me on the seat. Long, a dim, grey herring-bone cloth, it was not in fresh condition. The collar was greasy, there were the spots of Calverley's personal life on it; it was worn at the pockets and the second button hung loose. It had been left in so many places, it had been returned by so many hands, it had hung on so many alien hooks. It probably smelled of whisky. As it lounged there in its creases, I could imagine Calverley's head sticking out of the collar, the face with the gentle eyes, the violent mouth and the head-hunting smile. An ordinary stretch of herring-bone tweed, with its tradition of decorum, can never before have conveyed such sensations of rampage and free will, though now it lay sly, slothful—conceivably, I fancied, in remorse.

I drove for a couple of miles through the long-settled greenery of this part of the country. It was the time of the year when the chestnut leaves are dark and drying. I had no intention of stirring up a mare's nest at Mrs Flynn's, but went to Calverley's house. He lived in a small white lodge, a pretty, even arty place with a peacock cut out of the yew hedge. I got out, picked up the coat and knocked at the door and listened to the bees humming under the windows as I waited. A cottage woman who said she came in to clean and cook for Mr Calverley opened to me.

"I have brought back Mr Calverley's coat," I said. "I believe he and Mr Bassillero took the wrong ones the other day."

The cottage woman took the coat in the guarded way of one who had been taking in the discarded clothes of Mr Calverley from all kinds of undesirable people for many years.

"Where is the jacket?" she said. "He had a jacket."

"I don't think they swapped jackets," I said. "Perhaps I could take Mr Bassillero's coat back, if you know where it is."

The cottage woman became a defender of private property.

"Mr Calverley's gone to London," she said.

She had stepped back to hang the coat up in the little hall of the house, and I followed her in.

"He didn't say anything to me about a coat," the woman said.

"Isn't it hanging up there?" I said.

"There's nothing there," she said, pointing to the mackintoshes and jackets hanging on the pegs. There was, I saw at once, a short grey herring-bone coat hanging among them.

"I think I *see* Mr Bassillero's coat behind the mackintosh," I said, advancing eagerly.

The woman backed towards the peg, made herself swell and barred the way.

"Oh no," she said, "that is Mr Calverley's coat."

"Oh—I mean the one behind the mackintosh. . . ."

The cottage woman folded her hands on her apron and stuck her elbows out.

"That's his best one," she said. "He only got it three days ago."

"Three days—but that's extraordinary. Are you quite sure?"

"I look after all Mr Calverley's things. I'm mending it."

"It's the one," she said, playing her trump card with dignity, "that had the accident."

The woman's cheeks puffed with offence.

"You can see for yourself," she said, stepping scornfully out of the way.

I went to the peg and got the coat off the peg. As I did so, a peculiar thing happened. It divided into two pieces. It had been ripped almost in two from tail to collar. Half of one pocket was hanging off. The woman's face swelled with a purple blush.

"Mr Calverley had a few friends in and it got torn," she said.

"No buttons either," I said.

The woman did not like my grin.

"Mr Calverley," she said, "often buys new things and gets dissatisfied. He is very particular about his clothes. He said it was too short on him."

Naturally, Bassillero was the name on the tape.

At the end of the month Dr Ray came back. My last interview was in some respects like the first. He had a new disguise; he was sunburned. He put his hands in the pocket of his navy-blue jacket, tightening it at the waist, on his head was an imaginary yachting-cap; and he swung from side to side in his swivel chair. After hunting, he said, yachting was the finest training for any profession. It taught you not to cross the line before the gun goes off.

"Which is what you did," he said. "You weren't very bright when you let Calverley have his coat back before you got Bassillero's."

"But how could I take that back?" I said. "It was ripped to pieces."

"Did you ever notice Calverley's hands?" said the doctor. "Ever see him on a horse? Or pick up a head waiter by the collar?"

Dr Ray buzzed for his dispenser, and when the girl came in he asked her to find out whether Mr Bassillero was still in Scotland. Then, as it were, swinging the tiller over and coming round into the wind, Dr Ray looked me in the face.

"I think you've made the right decision. Keep out of general practice. Now, did you have any other trouble? The Fobhams—all quiet there? No heavy weather? Very odd—perhaps they're away too."

Things as they are

Things as They Are

Two middle-class women were talking at half-past eleven in the morning in the empty bar of a suburban public-house in a decaying district. It was a thundery and smoky morning in the summer and the traffic fumes did not rise from the street.

"Please, Frederick," said Mrs Forster, a rentier who spoke in a small, scented Edwardian voice, "two more large gins. What were you saying, Margaret?"

"The heat last night, Jill. I tossed and I turned. I couldn't sleep—and when I can't sleep I scratch," said Margaret, in her wronged voice. She was a barmaid, and this was her day off.

Mrs Forster drank and nodded.

"I think," said Margaret, "I mean, I don't mean anything rude, but I had a flea."

Mrs Forster put her grey head a little on one side and nodded again graciously under a flowered hat, like royalty.

"A flea, dear?" she said fondly.

Margaret's square mouth buckled after her next drink and her eyes seemed to be clambering frantically, like a pair of blatant prisoners behind her heavy glasses. Envy, wrong, accusation, were her life. Her black hair looked as though it had once belonged to an employer.

"I mean," she began to shout against her will, and Frederick, the elderly barman, moved away from her, "I mean, I wouldn't have mentioned it if you hadn't mentioned it."

Mrs Forster raised her beautiful arms doubtfully and touched her grey hair at the back, and she smiled again.

"I mean, when you mentioned that you had one yesterday you said," said Margaret.

"Oh," said Mrs Forster, too polite to differ.

"Yes, dear, don't you remember, we were in here—I mean, Frederick! Were we in here yesterday morning, Frederick, Mrs Forster and me . . .?"

Frederick stood upright, handsome, old and stupid.

"He's deaf, the fool, that's why he left the stage," Margaret said, glaring at him, knowing that he heard. "Jill, yesterday?"

Try and remember. You came in for a Guinness. I was having a small port, I mean, or were you on gin?"

"Oh, gin," said Mrs Forster in her shocked, soft, distinguished way, recognizing a word.

"That was it, then," said Margaret, shaking an iron chin up and down four times. "It might have hopped."

"Hopped," nodded Mrs Forster pleasantly.

"I mean, fleas hop, I don't mean anything vulgar." Margaret spread her hard, long bare arms and knocked her glass. "Distances," she said. "From one place to another place. A flea travels. From here, at this end of the bar, I don't say to the end, but along or across, I mean it could."

"Yes," said Mrs Forster with agreeable interest.

"Or from a person. I mean, a flea might jump on you—or on me, it might jump from someone else, and then off that person, it depends if they are with someone. It might come off a bus or a tram." Margaret's long arms described these movements and then she brought them back to her lap. "It was a large one," she said. "A brute."

"Oh, large?" said Mrs Forster sympathetically.

"Not large—I mean, it must have been large, I could tell by the bites, I know a small flea, I mean we all do—don't mind my mentioning it—I had big bites all up my leg," said Margaret, stretching out a long strong leg. Seeing no bites there, she pulled her tight serge skirt up with annoyance over her knee and up her thigh until, halted by the sight of her suspender, she looked angrily at Frederick and furtively at Mrs Forster and pulled her skirt down and held it down.

"Big as pennies, horrible pink lumps, red, Jill," argued Margaret. "I couldn't sleep. Scratching doesn't make it any better. It wasn't a London flea, that I know, Jill. I know a London flea, I mean you know a London flea, an ordinary one, small beastly things, I hate them, but this must have been some great black foreign brute. Indian! Frederick! You've seen one of those things?"

Frederick went with a small business of finger-flicking to the curtains at the back of the bar, peeped through as if for his cue. All bars were empty.

"Never," he said contemptuously when he came back, and turning his back on the ladies, hummed at the shelves of bottles.

"It's easy," Margaret began to shout once more, swallowing her gin, shouting at her legs, which kept slipping off the rail of the stool and enraged her by jerking her body, "I mean, for them to travel. They get on ships. I mean, those ships have been in the tropics, I don't say India necessarily, it might be in Egypt or Jamaica, a flea could hop off a native on to some sailor in the docks."

"You mean, dear, it came up from the docks by bus," said Mrs Forster. "You caught it on a bus?"

"No, Jill," said Margaret. "I mean some sailor brought it up."

"Sailor," murmured Mrs Forster going pale.

"Ted," said Margaret, accusing. "From Calcutta. Ted could have brought it off his ship."

Mrs Forster's head became fixed and still. She gazed mistily at Margaret and swayed. She finished her drink and steadied herself by looking into the bottom of the glass and waited for two more drops to come. Then she raised her small chin and trembled. She held a cigarette at the end of her thumb and her finger as if it were a stick of crayon and she were writing a message in blue smoke on the air. Her eyes closed sleepily, her lips sucked, pouted, and two tears rolled down her cheeks. She opened her large handbag, and from the mess of letters, bills, money, keys, purses and powder inside she took a small handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

"Ah!" said Margaret, trying to get her arm to Mrs Forster, but failing to reach her because her foot slipped on the rail again, so that she kicked herself. "Ah, Jill! I only mentioned it, I didn't mean anything, I mean when you said you had one, I said to myself 'That's it, it's an Indian. Ted's brought it out of the ship's hold.' I didn't mean to bring up Ted, Jill. There's nothing funny about it, sailors do."

Mrs Forster's cheeks and neck fattened amorously as she mewed and quietly cried and held her handkerchief tight.

"Here," said Margaret, mastering her. "Chin-chin, Jill, drink up, it will do you good. Don't cry. Here, you've finished it. Frederick, two more," she said, sliding towards Mrs Forster and resting one breast on the bar.

Mrs Forster straightened herself with dignity and stopped crying.

"He broke my heart," said Mrs Forster, panting. "I always found one in the bed after his leave was over."

"He couldn't help it," said Margaret.

"Oh no," said Mrs Forster.

"It's the life sailors live," said Margaret. "And don't you forget—are you listening, Jill? Listen to me. Look at me and listen. You're among friends, Jill. He's gone, Jill, like you might say, out of your life."

"Yes," said Mrs Forster, nodding again, repeating a lesson. "Out of my life."

"And good riddance too, Jill."

"Riddance," murmured Mrs Forster.

"Jill," shouted Margaret. "You've got a warm heart, that's what it is, as warm as Venus. I could never marry again after what I've been through, not whatever you paid me, not however much money it was you gave me, but you're not like me, your heart is too warm. You're too trusting."

"Trusting," Mrs Forster repeated, softly squeezing her eyelids.

"I tell you what it was," Margaret said. "You were in love, Jill," said Margaret, greedy in the mouth. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, dear."

"That's what I said. It was love. You loved him and you married him."

Margaret pulled herself up the bar and sat upright, looking with surprise at the breast that had rested there. She looked at her glass, she looked at Mrs Forster's; she picked up the glass and put it down. "It was a beautiful dream, Jill, you had your beautiful dream, and I say this from the bottom of my heart, I hope you will have a beautiful memory."

"Two months," sighed Mrs Forster and her eyes opened amorously in a grey glister and then sleepily half closed.

"But now, Jill, it's over. You've woke up, woken up. I mean, you're seeing things as they are."

The silence seemed to the two ladies to stand in a lump between them. Margaret looked into her empty glass again. Frederick lit a cigarette he had made and his powdered face split up into twitches as he took the first draw and then put the cigarette economically on the counter. He went through his repertory of small coughs and then, raising his statesman-like head, he listened to the traffic passing and hummed.

Mrs Forster let her expensive fur slip back from her fine shoulders and looked at the rings on her small hands.

"I loved him, Margaret," she said. "I really did love him."

"We know you loved him. I mean, it was love," said Margaret. "It's nothing to do with the age you are. Life's never over. It was love. You're a terrible woman, Jill."

"Oh, Margaret," said Mrs Forster with a discreet glee, "I know I am."

"He was your fourth," said Margaret.

"Don't, Margaret," giggled Mrs Forster.

"No, no, I'm not criticizing. I never criticize. Live and let live. It wasn't a fancy, Jill, you loved him with all your heart."

Jill raised her chin in a ladylike way.

"But I won't be hit," she whispered. "At my age I allow no one to strike me. I am fifty-seven, Margaret, I'm not a girl."

"That's what we all said," said Margaret. "You were head-strong."

"Oh, Margaret!" said Mrs Forster, delighted.

"Oh yes, yes, you wouldn't listen, not you. You wouldn't listen to me. I brought him up to the Chequers, or was it the Westmorland—no, it was the George—and I thought to myself, I know your type, young man—you see, Jill, I've had experience—out for what he could get; well, honest, didn't I tell you?"

"His face was very brown."

"Brown! Would you believe me? No, you wouldn't. I can see him. He came up here the night of the dance. He took his coat off. Well, we all sweat."

"But," sighed Mrs Forster, "he had white arms."

"Couldn't keep his hands to himself. 'Put it away, pack it up,' I said. He didn't care. He was after Mrs Kleb, and she went potty on him till Mrs Sinclair came and then that Mr Baum interfered. That sort lives for trouble. All of them mad on him—I bet Frederick could tell a tale, but he won't. Trust Frederick," she said with a look of hate at the barman. "Upstairs in the billiard room, I shan't forget it. Torpedoed twice, he said. I mean, Ted said. He torpedoed one or two. What happened to him that night?"

"Someone made him comfortable, I am sure," said Mrs Forster, always anxious about lonely strangers.

"And you were quite rude with me, Jill, I don't mean rude, you couldn't be rude, it isn't in you, but we almost came to words . . ."

"What did you say, Margaret?" said Mrs Forster from a dream.

"I said at your age, fifty-seven, I said you can't marry a boy of twenty-six."

Mrs Forster sighed.

"Frederick. Freddy, dear. Two more," said Mrs Forster.

Margaret took her glass, and while she was finishing it Frederick held his hand out for it, insultingly rubbing his fingers.

"Hah!" said Margaret, blowing out her breath as the gin burned her. "You bowled over him. I mean, you bowled him over, a boy of twenty-six. Sailors are scamps."

"Not," said Mrs Forster, reaching to trim the back of her hair again and tipping her flowered hat forward on her forehead and austerey letting it remain like that. "Not," she said, getting stuck at the word.

"Not what?" said Margaret. "Not a scamp? I say he was. I said at the time, I still say it, a rotten little scamp."

"Not," said Mrs Forster.

"A scamp," said Margaret.

"Not. Not with a belt," said Mrs Forster. "I will not be hit with a belt."

"My husband," began Margaret.

"I will not, Margaret," said Mrs Forster. "Never. Never. Never with a belt."

"Not hit, struck," Mrs Forster said, defying Margaret.

"It was a plot, you could see it a mile off, it would make you laugh, a lousy rotten plot," Margaret let fly, swallowing her drink. "He was after your house and your money. If he wasn't, what did he want to get his mother in for, a big three-storey house like yours, in a fine residential position; just what he'd like, a little rat like that . . ."

Mrs Forster began a long laugh to herself.

"My grandfather," she giggled.

"What?" said Margaret.

"Owns the house. Not owns. Owned, I say, the house," said Mrs Forster, tapping the bar.

"Frederick," said Mrs Forster, "did my grandfather own the house?"

"Uh?" said Frederick, giving his cuff-links a shake. "Which house?"

"My house over there," said Mrs Forster, pointing to the door.

"I know he owned the house, dear," Margaret said. "Frederick knows."

"Let me ask Frederick," said Mrs Forster. "Frederick, you knew my grandfather."

"Uh?" said Frederick, leaning to listen.

"He's as deaf as a wall," Margaret said.

Frederick walked away to the curtains at the back of the bar and peeped through it. Nervously he came back, glancing at his handsome face in the mirror; he chose an expression of stupidity and disdain, but he spoke with a quiet rage.

"I remember this street," he raged, "when you could hardly get across it for the carriages and the footmen and the maids in their lace caps and aprons. You never saw a lady in a place like this."

He turned his back on them and walked again secretively to the curtains, peeped again, and came back stiffly on feet skewed sideways by the gravity of the gout and put the tips of his old, well-manicured fingers on the bar for them to admire.

"Now," he said, giving a socially shocked glance over the windows that were still half-boarded after the bombing, "all tenements, flats, rooms, walls falling down, balconies dropping off, bombed out and rotting," he said. He sneered at Margaret. "Not the same people. Slums. Riff-raff now. Mrs Forster's father was the last of the old school."

"My grandfather," said Mrs Forster.

"He was a gentleman," said Frederick.

Frederick walked to the curtains.

"Horrible," he muttered loudly, timing his exit.

There was a silence until he came back. The two women looked at the enormous empty public-house, with its high cracked and dirty ceilings, its dusty walls unpainted for twenty years. Its top floor had been on fire. Its windows had gone, three or four times.

Frederick mopped up scornfully between the glasses of gin on the counter.

"That's what I mean," said Margaret, her tongue swelling up, her mouth side-slipping. "If you'd given the key to his mother, where would you have been? They'd have shut you out of your own house, and what's the good of the police? All the scum have come to the top since the war. You were too innocent, and we

saved you. Jill, well, I mean, if we hadn't all got together, the whole crowd, where were you? He was going to get into the house and then one night when you'd been over at the George or the Chequers or over here and you'd had one or two . . ."

Jill looked proudly and fondly at her glass, crinkling her childish eyes.

"Oh," said Jill in a little naughty-faced protest.

"I mean, I don't mean plastered," said Margaret, bewildered by the sound of her own voice and moving out her hand to bring it back.

"Not stinking, Jill, excuse me. I mean we sometimes have two or three. Don't we?" Margaret appealed to the barman.

"Uh?" said Frederick coldly. "Where was this?"

"Oh, don't be stupid," said Margaret, turning round suddenly and knocking her glass over, which Frederick picked up and took away. "What was I saying, Jill?"

A beautiful still smile, like a butterfly opening on an old flower, came on to Mrs. Forster's face.

"Margaret," she confided, "I don't know."

"I know," said Margaret, waving her heavy bare arm. "You'd have been signing papers. He'd have stripped you. He might have murdered you like that case last Sunday in the papers. A well-to-do woman like you. The common little rat. Bringing his fleas."

"He—was—not—common," said Mrs Forster, sitting upright suddenly, and her hat fell over her nose, giving her an appearance of dashing distinction.

"He was off a ship," said Margaret.

"He was an officer."

"He *said* he was an officer," said Margaret, struggling with her corsets.

Mrs Forster got down from her stool and held with one hand to the bar. She laughed quietly.

"He . . ." she began.

"What?" said Margaret.

"I shan't tell you," said Mrs Forster. "Come here."

Margaret leaned towards her.

"No, come here, stand here," said Mrs Forster.

Margaret stood up, also holding to the bar, and Mrs Forster put her hands to Margaret's neck and pulled her head down and began to laugh in Margaret's ear. She was whispering.

"What?" shouted Margaret. "I can't hear. What is it?"

Mrs Forster laughed with a roar in Margaret's ear.

"He—he—was a man, Margaret," she whispered. She pushed her away.

"You know what I mean, Margaret," she said in a stern clear voice. "You do, don't you? Come here again, I'll tell you."

"I heard you."

"No, come here again, closer. I'll tell you. Where are you?"

Mrs Forster whispered again, and then drew back.

"A man," she said boldly.

"And you're a woman, Jill."

"A man!" said Mrs Forster. "Everything, Margaret. You know—everything. But not with a belt. I won't be struck." Mrs Forster reached for her glass.

"Vive la France!" she said, holding up her glass, drank and banged it down. "Well, I threw him out."

A lament broke from Margaret. She had suddenly remembered one of *her* husbands. She had had two.

"He went off to his work and I was waiting for him at six. He didn't come back. I'd no money in the house, that was seventeen years ago and Joyce was two and he never even wrote. I went through his pockets and gave his coats a shake, wedding-rings poured out of them. What do you get for it? Your own daughter won't speak to you, ashamed to bring her friends to the house. You're always drunk, she says. To her own mother. Drunk!" said Margaret. "I might have one or perhaps two. What does a girl like that know?"

With a soft, quick crumpling, a soft thump and a long sigh, Mrs Forster went to the floor and full length lay there with a beautiful smile on her face, and a fierce noise of pleasure came from her white face. Her hat rolled off, her bag fell down, open and spilling with a loud noise.

"Eh," said Frederick, coming round from behind the counter.

"Passed out, again. Get her up, get her up quick," said Margaret. "Her bag, her money."

"Lift her on the side," she said. "I will take her legs."

They carried Mrs Forster to the broken leather settee and laid her down there. "Here's her bag." Margaret wrangled. "It's all there."

"And the one in your hand," said Frederick, looking at the pound note in Margaret's hand.

And then the crowd came in: Mrs Klebs, Mrs Sinclair, Mr Baum, the one they called Pudding, who had fallen down the area at Christmas, and a lot more.

"What's this?" they said. "Not again? Frederick, what's this?"

"They came in here," Frederick said in a temper. "Ladies, talking about love."

It May Never Happen

I SHALL not forget the fingers that fastened me into the stiff collar. Or how I was clamped down under the bowler-hat which spread my rather large ears outwards and how, my nose full of the shop smell of new suit, I went off for the first time to earn my living.

"You are beginning life," they said.

"You have your foot on the first rung of the ladder," they said.

"Excelsior," my new Uncle Belton said.

I was going to work in the office of one of my uncles, a new uncle, the second husband of my mother's sister, who had just married into the family. His name was Belton, a man of forty-four with a tight, bumptious little business in the upholstery trade, a business that sounded so full of possibilities that it would blow up and burst, out of sheer merit. The push of Mr Belton, the designing of Mr Phillimore, his partner, made it irresistible. The name of the firm was Belton and Phillimore.

On my first day I met Mr Belton outside our railway station. I watched a horse eating and I read all the hoardings while I waited. Mr Belton was half an hour late. He was one of those cheerful, self-centred men whose tempers shorten when they are in the wrong. They put themselves right by sailing out into general reflections.

"Punctuality, Vincent, is everything," said Mr Belton bitterly. "How long have you been here?"

"Half an hour."

"*Why* have you been here half an hour?"

Mr Belton was looked upon as a sharp-shooter, a raider in our family. He had been around his new relations trying to raise capital for his business, he had carried off my mother's sister in marriage, he was carrying me off to his office. He was a small, round, dominant and smartly dressed man, who usually wore brown. His black hair was parted in the middle, and when he arrived anywhere he arrived with aplomb, bouncing down as hard as a new football on asphalt and very nearly on one's toes.

A new business, a new marriage, a new outlook on life—my

brand-new uncle looked as though he had come straight out of a shop-window. He had been hardly more than a quarter of an hour in our house before we thought our paint looked shabby and the rooms small. The very curtains seemed to shrink like the poor as he talked largely of exports, imports, agencies, overheads, discounts, rebates, cut prices and debentures. And when he had done with these he was getting at what we paid for meat, where we got our coal and how much at a time, telling us, too, where to buy carpets and clothes, gas-fires, art pottery and electric irons. He even gave us the name of a new furniture polish. It sounded like one of the books of the Old Testament. He walked about the house touching things, fingering picture-frames, turning chairs round, looking under tables, tapping his toes thoughtfully on the linoleum. Then he sat down, and lifting his foot restfully to his knee and exposing the striking pattern of his socks, he seemed to be working out how much we would get if we sold up house and home. The message "Sell up and begin again" flashed on and off in the smiles of his shining new face like morse.

"I can get all these things," he said, "in the trade."

When he and I sat in the train that morning I thought Mr Belton looked larger.

"I don't want you to think I'm lecturing you, boy," he said, "but there are many boys who would give their right hand to walk straight into this business as you are doing."

"Yes, Uncle," I said.

"A little thing—you must call me 'sir'."

"Yes, Uncle," I said, "sir."

"And you must call Mr Phillimore 'sir'."

I had forgotten all about Mr Belton's partner.

"But for Mr Phillimore you would not have this chance," Mr Belton said, detecting at once that I had forgotten. "It's a very remarkable thing, it's really wonderful, some people would think more than wonderful, that Mr Phillimore agreed to it. He's a very busy man. A man with a great deal on his mind. There are people in the trade who would be glad to pay for the privilege of consulting Mr Phillimore. His word is law in the firm, and I want you to be most respectful to him. Don't forget to say 'Good morning, sir' to him when you see him, and if he should offer to shake hands you must, of course, shake hands with him. I think he may offer to shake hands, but he may not. If he rings his bell

or asks you to do anything, you must do it at once. Be quick, and mind your manners. If he is going out of the room, open the door for him. Mr Phillimore notices everything."

Naturally, Mr Belton had seemed all-powerful to me, and it awed me to hear that behind this god was yet another god to whom even he deferred.

It distressed me that there were other people in the compartment who might hear this conversation. The day was damp and a low smoke from the train blew along the window as though we were travelling through cloud into another universe.

My face must have looked strained and pale. I had eaten very little for breakfast and my head ached where the bowler-hat pressed a red mark on my forehead. My uncle relaxed a little. At the next station two girls got out and we were alone in the compartment.

"I shall always remember the first time I stayed with Mr Phillimore and his mother." So far my uncle had been hectoring and glum; but now a luminous gravity of expression came on his big experienced face and covered it like the skin on a balloon. He looked curiously light, as if he had been inflated with hydrogen and would rise from the seat of the empty railway carriage and blow away out of the window. He had what is called a common accent, none too certain about aitches and double negatives, but his voice was musical and now became rarefied when he spoke of his partner.

"In Mr Phillimore's 'ouse—ahem, house, the gentlemen give up their chairs to the ladies when they come into the room. And when the ladies leave the room you have to let them walk in front of you," my uncle said. He stared at this picture in his memory with wonder. He seemed to hang in the higher air and then gradually he subsided and became himself again, a shade coarser than he had been before. His brown eyes looked unsteadily, a thick smile began nervously by his nose and slowly spread over his face, and a twist of deprecation came to the corners of his lips.

"You see, Mr Phillimore is a gentleman. It may seem peculiar to you and me," he said.

"But people are peculiar," he said. And the smile slowly deepened as it will on the face of a baby, until he began to look fondly and sentimentally at me.

"I'll give you a little tip, boy," he said, putting his hand on my knee, a touch that sent an uncomfortable thrill through my body and flushed me with all the shyness of my age. "Do you mind if I give you a little piece of advice, something helpful?"

"No, Uncle," I murmured. "Sir."

"You needn't call me sir, now," he said kindly. "If Mr Phillimore should ring for you," he said, "just remember the infant Samuel. You remember how when our Lord called Samuel the boy said, 'Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth'. Well, just pause and say that, just quietly to yourself, before you go and see what Mr Phillimore wants. Don't hang around, of course. Sharp's the word. But say it."

My throat pinched, my tongue went dry. I should have said that Mr Belton was a religious man. His expression became dreamy.

"I think there'd be no harm in your saying it if I ring, too," he said. Even he looked surprised after making this suggestion.

The office and workshop of Belton and Phillimore, makers of Butifix furniture and especially of the Butifix armchair and sofa, were at No. 7, in a row of old stained houses standing behind railings. The street was flogged by trams and dray-horses. Dust flew into one's eyes from the vans. The doorstep of No. 7 was the only whitened one in the street.

"Step over it," Mr Belton said. I nearly fell over it. From Mr Belton's manner, from his militant walk, I had imagined I was going to work in a large factory, where hundreds of workers were frizzling under acres of glass roof. But Belton and Phillimore occupied only the ground floor of this old house whose window-sills slanted and gave a leer of depression to its aspect. A number of small businesses—a tailor or two, a lamp-shade manufacturer, and agents for pulleys, gloves and shop-fittings worked in single rooms above. A smell of glue hung like a dead animal about the doorway and there were packing-cases stored in the hall. A notice which was never taken down all the time I was there said, "Young Improvers Wanted. Apply Schenk." Someone had written "April 26 Holborn Baths" in pencil underneath. On my uncle's floor there was first a small room, made by new glass partitions, where a typist sat. She was a large-boned, round-shouldered girl of seventeen with fine yellow hair, who worked in a green overcoat. Her office smelled of gas, paint and tea. Next

door was the room occupied by Mr Belton and Mr Phillimore, and beyond, down the passage, was the large workroom under a top light where one could hear the sound of a turning-machine, the swish of a plane and the noise of hammering. Patterns of cloth, samples of hair, kapok and down were on the large desk where the two partners sat in their office, and there I waited alone, listening to the typewriter—an old-fashioned one—clumping up and down like the police. My uncle had changed into a white dust-coat and marched out to find Mr Phillimore. Before he went, he leant down and smelled a bowl of flowers on the table. "Colour," he smiled patriotically, "we're colourful people."

"Speak Lord . . ." I gabbled, but I was too afraid to get to the end of the sentence. I had had many daydreams about Mr Phillimore. He was a myth in our family. No one had ever seen him; but it was agreed that he had been the making of my uncle. Indeed, people said, he had been my uncle's salvation. I foresaw a tall, clean, sarcastic man with a deep stiff collar, as clean as a doctor. Or perhaps one of those bullying, morally overweighted figures from the North of England whose minds pass like soft steamrollers over you, suffocating rather than flattening you with the eiderdown gospel of work and righteousness. The door opened. I was startled by a high-pitched, eager feminine giggle; a small man stumbled towards me.

"Er—er—hullo, 'llo, my dear," the voice said. I saw a white dust-coat. I saw a pair of agonized yellow-blue eyes popping with an expression of helplessness out of a badly pimpled face. Really, Mr Phillimore looked raw and bleeding. Then I saw his untidy wheat-coloured hair, with a pink scalp showing through it; and after that, loose lips drawn back, rabbit fashion, from a set of protruding teeth, each tooth shooting out in a different direction. It was a mouth which looked ravenous and could not close; and saliva, therefore, fizzed out of it when he was excited. He was young, no more than thirty-five, and my first sight of Mr Phillimore suggested the frantic, yelping, disorganized expression of a copulating dog.

Before he got to me, Mr Phillimore caught the pocket of his white dust-coat on the door-handle, dropped a ruler from his pocket and trod on a pencil.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" cried Mr Phillimore, going down on his knees with a sigh of inexpressible fatigue.

"Pick it up," said my uncle to me bitterly, giving me a push.

"Oh no, *no*, my dear!" said Mr Phillimore from the floor. "My fault, Mr B. I'm most frightfully sorry. How are you? At last, after all these months! Are you quite recovered from your illness?" He was on his feet now, a weak damp hand clung will-lessly to mine and he gazed eagerly into my eyes.

"I haven't been ill, sir," I said.

"You don't look well," he said doubtfully. Then his spirit rose again: "The moment I heard of you I *longed* for you to come. We've been waiting for you for months. We're simply *killed* with work, my dear, you've no idea."

Mr Phillimore sat down at the partners' desk and looked at me reproachfully. He looked congenitally exhausted.

"Ah, Vernon," he said.

"Vincent, sir," I murmured.

"Vincent," he said. "You and I have not the energy, the decision of the remarkable Mr B. He is a remarkable man, Vernon, he has been my salvation. Vincent, I mean, I'm *so* sorry."

My uncle, who had sat down at the desk and was tapping a sheet of figures with a pencil, glanced up at this remark and smiled mechanically. My confusion was natural. I had always gathered Mr Phillimore was the saviour; now I heard the rôles reversed. I blinked. The two men were saving each other.

"With two more machines, Phillimore," my uncle said, ignoring the worship of his partner and acting a part, "we could treble these figures." And he brought his soft fist down like a sponge on the desk, not heavily, but strongly enough to make Phillimore strain to attention.

Though I had been only a few minutes in the office I felt already (when I heard those words) the swirl of urgency and importance in the affairs of Belton and Phillimore. I stared at Mr Phillimore until he must have thought I was trying to get instructions from him by hypnosis. To my disappointment a look of despair and appeal came into Mr Phillimore's face. The telephone bell rang and, with a shudder, Mr Phillimore took up the telephone, saying before he answered it:

"P'please, Mr B, don't expand the business any' more for a moment." Then, mastering his stammer, dropping his voice into his throat, Mr Phillimore concentrated on answering the telephone efficiently. Copying and practising Uncle Belton's gesture,

Phillimore weakly hammered the air with *his* fists as he talked, glancing at my uncle nervously as he did so. When he had finished his telephone conversation and had told my uncle about it, Mr Phillimore looked at me and said:

"It is true. I'm not exaggerating." He nodded towards my uncle, who was still tapping his pencil on the figures. "He saved my life." Then he smiled and said to my uncle, "Do you like the flowers I brought for us?"

"I'd sooner you brought me an order, Phillimore," said my uncle.

Nothing happens in an office. One day is like another. When I look back upon that year the only thing I see is a love-affair—the love-affair of Mr Belton and Mr Phillimore. They sat in their office like husband and wife in a sitting-room. It was not really a love-affair, but a salvation affair. Mr Belton had the rippling mind of the natural salesman and, strengthening it, was a powerful evangelical notion that he must save people from their own undoing. He did not sell: he saved. He saved people, when he was travelling in towels or electric irons or cretonne, for example, from the sadness of not having these things. When he was in the stocking business, he rescued people from the misery of not having so many hundreds of dozens of stockings. The world needed to be saved from its parsimony, its uncreative caution. Mr Belton pumped salvation into the world, rescued men from the Slough of Despond. Giant Despair—I have heard him say to customers—is man's greatest enemy. And when he came to have businesses or agencies of his own after he had married my mother's sister, and his relations put money into these enterprises, he was rescuing *them*. He was rescuing their savings from the ignominy of two and a half per cent. or whatever it was, in some prim, nibbling bank.

"Oh, ye of little faith," he said, cocking his dark eyebrow. And if things went wrong the eyebrow would straighten.

"It was an experience," he would rebuke his critics. "I had to buy *mine*."

It was my new Uncle Belton's gift of salvation which had captured Mr Phillimore.

Now that I had seen Mr Phillimore, Uncle Belton modified the Phillimore myth and said to me when I went home with him in the tobacco smoke of the train:

"Mr Phillimore is peculiar. We all have our peculiarities. He is really an artist. He does our designs. When I met Mr Phillimore three years ago he had a tiny chair-making, arts and craft shop in Somerset. He was living under his mother's thumb. Imagine a man of thirty-five who can't go out in the evening without his mother's permission. Terrible."

Uncle Belton scowled.

"The poor devil was drinking himself to death," he said. "He shut himself in his room and drank whisky out of a hot-water bottle."

Uncle Belton's face went pale as lichen.

"It might have led to women—anything," he said. Then he blinked. He had evidently been struck by the thought that he ought not to have said this to me about his partner. His voice became bland and expansive.

"There he was—and independent mind you, he had money—going downhill as fast as I have ever seen a man go—a gentleman, paralysed, hypnotized, you might call it. I told him straight what was the matter with him. I saw it at once—he had to get away from that mother. I told her, 'You're a mother. You don't know nothing about your son.'"

His voice now became merry. "It's marvellous, reely," he said. "Marvellous the way things work out. I just went down there to look around."

Uncle Belton saw those two provincial people with their neat lifeless little business. He saw in them a temporary gold-mine. But there was more in my uncle's passion than acquisitiveness. He had a horror of drink; he had a greater horror of spiritual disasters. He stepped back from the catastrophic crashes of the inner life. His remedy lay in that part of the Protestant tradition which deals with the conflicts of the inner life by annihilating the inner life altogether. When Uncle Belton and Mr Phillimore left Somerset to start the firm of Belton & Phillimore their departure was like an elopement.

"It has been an experience for me, knowing your uncle," said Mr Phillimore to me again and again. He had borrowed the word "experience" from Mr Belton. His voice rose into the treble. "What drive, Vernon, Vincent—which is it? Vincent! What drive!"

My day's work at the office was monotonous, like family life.

For if my new Uncle Belton and Mr Phillimore were husband and wife, I was the only child who strays listlessly from room to room trying to find something to do. I stuck on stamps, I copied letters. I put clean water in the flower-bowl which Mr Phillimore kept filled. They were a love-offering. I took messages. I went across the road to buy buns for the typist, or my uncle would send me out to collect a shirt from a shop or to buy a bottle of hair-cream at his barber's. My uncle had thick glossy hair as still as glass on his head. We lived in all the intensity of domestic life. Uncle was always willing to stop his work and address a manly mid-week sermon to Mr Phillimore. Mr Phillimore was always willing to stop what he was doing and talk to me. He would follow me ravenously about open-mouthed as if he would graze on my hair. We had been brought up on the myth of the unapproachability of Mr Phillimore: the myth had a germ of truth: it was he who, continuously, made the approaches.

"Ah youth, youth, golden-headed youth," he would say as he passed me in the workroom. I had thick black hair not unlike my uncle's and I was trying to make it look glossy. Through the window in the partition Miss Croft, the typist, kept her little eyes on all of us. One of my anxieties was to make Miss Croft smile, but she was in her wooden teens, and her lips set firmly when I stood in the room with her. She looked at me with the swollen face of an elder sister. It was a long time before I saw that she was piqued because once *she* had been the only child in this family and I had supplanted her. A woman's life is swayed by her feelings, but Miss Croft was not yet a woman: she was learning about her feelings, how to use them, like a young girl who is learning to play scales on the piano, and she was still awkward with them.

Mr Phillimore would often stand at the door of her room talking to me, and as he did so, his look would pop anxiously, intimately, apologetically in Miss Croft's direction. Mr Phillimore's eyes seemed to say, "In my life I need all the help I can get from *everyone*. Don't be jealous and hurt!" One could see what had happened. Miss Croft silently reproached him.

"You are wasting Mr Phillimore's time. That poor man is run off his feet," she said abruptly to me.

"*He* started talking to *me*," I said.

Miss Croft sat back from her typewriter.

"He is the brains of this firm," Miss Croft said. "I have been here from the beginning. I've seen it all. That man," she was developing her simple possessive instinct as if she were doing arm exercises, "tells me everything." She always called him "that man".

Yes, and now Mr Phillimore had started telling me everything.

Miss Croft gave her head a short upward jerk. She put a lump in her chin by running her tongue round her lower gum, and began typing again with her big red fingers. I loved watching the quickness of her fingers. There were two or three other things about her that were pretty; her little starry violet eyes and her small waist; the curve of her legs was becoming lovely. And she had a lisping childlike voice. But she was changing; what was pretty one week became plain the next. She was like a creature in a chrysalis.

"One thing," she said complacently, "that man won't be here long. I can see things."

When she saw how astonished and impressed I was by this remark, Miss Croft was very satisfied.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

There were things, she said primly to me, that were confidential.

My Uncle Belton was a man who was unaware of the little situations that were simmering all day long around him. He lived juicily, like an orange, within the containing rind of his objects in life. He was out two or three times a week seeing customers and walking in his dream of making the business larger and getting larger premises. When he wasn't tapping his pencil on columns of figures or abusing someone on the telephone, he was gazing vehemently at the plans of new premises he had seen. One afternoon he came back in a hearty mood and sent me to tell Mr Phillimore he had brought *him* a present.

"A present," cried Mr Phillimore, who was working on the frame of a sofa. Up he jumped. "How exciting," he said.

We had a foreman with bloodshot eyes who always winked at me when I came with a message for Mr Phillimore. He winked now.

"You've got a present for me!" cried Mr Phillimore, almost running to Uncle Belton's office. "What a thrill!"

My uncle did not give Mr Phillimore the parcel. He wanted

some of the surprise for himself. He wanted a part of everything for himself; it was not greed but part of his gregarious generosity. He would have eaten your lunch for you so that you and he could feel more genially at one. We watched Uncle undo the parcel. It contained a small framed picture. He stood it on the desk and turned it to face Mr Phillimore.

"Just made for you, Phillimore," he said. The picture was simply a text done in poker-work. The words were: "Don't Worry—It May Never Happen."

"Don't worry—it may never happen," Phillimore read with delight and he rubbed his hands together.

"Don't worry—it may never happen," ruminated my uncle in his deep, golden, optimistic voice.

"Wonderful," cried Phillimore. "Oh, good." Like a boy clapping a catch at cricket. Then he looked serious. He shook his head. "Very true. Very true," he said thoughtfully.

"I'll tell you what—we'll hang it on the wall."

"That's an idea," said Uncle.

"Over the mantelpiece? Or over the desk, do you think?" said Mr Phillimore.

He danced about, holding the picture now in this place and now in the other. Uncle helped him. They were like a newly married couple hanging up a picture.

"Over the mantelpiece, where you can see it," said Mr Belton.

"Here, do you think?"

"No—a little higher. There! No, a bit to the left." Yes, it was a marriage. Mr Phillimore and Mr Belton sat down exhausted, gazing at the picture now hanging on the wall. Phillimore read it aloud again.

"True," he said. "Very true."

"Yes," he sighed, shaking his head. "It's just made for me. Why worry? There's no need to. One's desires, one's wishes, one's hopes—they won't come off. Nothing changes."

"Here," cried my uncle. "It doesn't say that. It says don't be held back by your fears, the thing you're afraid of just won't occur. You're not afraid of what you want coming true, are you? That would be ridiculous."

"My dear Vincent," said Mr Phillimore, getting my name right for once, "that only shows how different Mr B is from the rest of us."

"Good godfathers," cried my uncle. "Phillimore, you're morbid."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Mr Phillimore with a primness and secretiveness I had never noticed before. "But one preserves one's integrity."

And Phillimore lifted his nose and one could hear a hissing intake of air like a gas escape. It was a little terrifying. Uncle scowled playfully, but he was put out. For a few seconds the two men considered each other, and my uncle, being by far the shorter and stouter, had the advantage of weight. Many men who were taller than my new Uncle Belton were intimidated by his vehement shortness. He seemed to be shooting upwards at one like a howitzer.

After his expeditions to the warm and buzzing platters of the world, Belton was often irritable; when he came back, he was obliged to return to earth when he found an order had been delayed, or some timber had a flaw in it, or they were short of cloth because Phillimore had advised Belton to go easy on the buying. And now after the difference over the meaning of the picture, Belton went irritably off to the workroom.

"I hope," said Mr Phillimore, "dear Mr B won't upset the hands. I shall feel it is my fault." And then turning to me, begging for support, he said, "Yet how frightful, how terrifying it would be, Vincent, if what one wished came true. How futile life would be if one's fears were not realized. Don't you think?" He watched me.

"I should die!" he cried, and his hands hung limply from the wrist like wet leaves.

This kind of conversation was beyond me. And he often spoke like this in front of the workers, who winked at me all the time. On the other hand, I could not be sure that Mr Phillimore wasn't mocking me. And then I suppose in our family—my own and my uncle's—we were stamped with a reserve about our personal lives. We had no private lives. We simply had secret lives, like secret drinkers. We were the natural opponents of private life. We regarded ourselves as units of will or energy directed upon our various purposes. Mr Belton saw himself (for he was religious) as a new kind of fusion of science and religion, a successful sperm, fertilizing the Christian endeavour. Contact with a man like Phillimore, who appeared to put feebleness, illness, fright, in-

capacity and failure in life first, was bewildering. Phillimore's eagerness to cut a bad figure was like an indecent physical exposure. He was the sperm which fails.

So when Mr Phillimore cried out, "I should die," I saw something new in his expression, something watchful, crystalline, and with the madman's order, in his eye. For a second or two I had the impression that Mr Phillimore was *not* a fool; that he was cunning and obstinate, and long-sighted. The impression dissolved and indeed I forgot about it or he made me forget it by a sudden change of his mood. He was as limp as a willow. What I would call his good-bye air appeared. I mean, that after some gust of confidence, some anxious tail-wagging spaniel-like prance of intimacy, Mr Phillimore would draw back and fade. He would gradually back to the door and stand there getting dimmer. It was like being in a train which is moving out and Mr Phillimore stood on the platform stammering about how lucky you were to be going away, while he was left behind. The weak hands seemed to wave. It was his vanity to be left behind.

"Ah well, Vernon," he said (I was beginning to think he got my name wrong out of malice), "where shall we all be in ten years' time? You—I see you—rich, successful, in the arms of some superb mistress—Miss Croft, shall we say, but in a tiger skin. And I . . . alas, in my solitary room. . . ."

He had gone.

Every firm has its Devil, that is to say, its chief competitor. And this Devil is always a firm of the same size or perhaps a little more important. Belton and Phillimore were not afraid of their big competitors: the huge furniture manufacturers and upholsterers who devoured the trade like ranging wolves. Belton and Phillimore admired these great firms. They were afraid of the little ones, and especially of one little one.

If my uncle wanted to give Mr Phillimore a fright, he would say:

"Salter's on the move again. He's cut his prices." Or, holding up a letter: "Look at this. Salter's giving six months' credit."

My uncle would look bitter and belligerent. One was warring against Sin. Salter, my uncle conveyed, was a cheat, a fraud, a sinister figure who was plotting against their lives. Salter copied

our designs and cheapened them. He stole our customers. He would try and get hold of our workers. Like a highwayman, he preyed on our labour. He wanted to strangle us. My uncle was not eloquent about this; he was as curt, as stubborn as a soldier. Salter might have been outside on the street sniping at him.

"We can't fight *that*," my uncle would say, meaning, of course, the opposite.

"That defeats us," Phillimore eagerly agreed. He put down his ruler and his pencil, leaned back in his chair and made a noise in his throat like the death-rattle—a noise natural to him. He also had an irritating habit of whistling through the gap in his front teeth, a whistle of surrender. It was he, at these times, who appeared to be "saving" my uncle; one saw the emergence of Phillimore's hatred of success, the trembling of compassion in his nature. An expression of one lying blissfully in hospital came on Phillimore's face. He would have done anything for Belton at that moment, and if Belton had observed the character of his partner—which, of course, he had not; he did not believe in anyone's character but his own—he would have chosen this moment to say to Mr Phillimore:

"Go down to your mother, tell her we are on the edge of bankruptcy, get her to give us this extra capital we need. Tell her it is a terrible risk, that we may very likely lose it. Tell her it's desperate. Tell her we may not last another month. Go out and get drunk, it's the only thing to do."

The prospect of ruin would have been irresistible to Mr Phillimore. He would have done in this mood what in a more confident one he would have resisted. Alas, Belton was no reader of the heart. He turned and attacked Phillimore.

"Defeat us," he said, setting his chin. "I don't understand the meaning of the word, Phillimore. There is no defeat. What's Salter? A draper"—Uncle's lowest word of contempt—"a draper, Phillimore. Give me the price-list. Get me Dobson's on the phone. Miss Croft, come and take these letters. Boy, take this note up to the bank. . . ."

The crisis of sacrifice, loss, abandonment was passed. Like a wife who sees her husband recover and so free himself from helpless reliance on her, Phillimore saw his compassion scattered. Phillimore would have liked to rock my uncle like a baby—and indeed

Belton often looked like one. But optimism had won. And when my uncle did raise the question of getting more capital, Mr Phillimore became evasive. The "good-bye" look came back. He admired my uncle's resilience, but the admiration itself exhausted him and left him—how shall I say it? I can remember only his appearance, the open mouth, the choking open mouth under the dropping teeth—it left him in a condition of—nausea. And one heard the sound, the sinister air rushing up his nostrils, like a preparation for suicide.

About this time I used to go out to lunch with Mr Phillimore and one day I saw this Devil who haunted our firm and planned our destruction. Phillimore and I were in a teashop.

"Oh dear," said Phillimore, "there's that poor wretch, Salter." My heart jumped. The devilries of Salter had so impressed me that I was ready to run out of the place.

"Has he seen us?" I said, trying to look undisturbed. I ought not to have been surprised by the self-possession of Phillimore: Salter meant disaster.

"That man might have ruined us," said Phillimore sadly. "But for your wonderful uncle, Vernon, we should be in Queer Street, up the spout, right in the middle of the purée."

Phillimore sighed and shook his head. He gazed in Salter's direction with affection. He gazed, I now suspect, with nostalgia. And I, gazing there too, saw a stringy and dejected man, bald but not sufficiently so, with pince-nez like a dismal pair of birds on either side of his nose, and a grey moustache damp with tea. The teashop was under a railway arch and we could hear the trains rumbling over our heads like rollers. They seemed to flatten and crush the figure of Mr Salter in his old raincoat. I suppose he knew us, for he looked at us miserably, and I have never seen a figure which conveyed more resignation to injustice, more passive disquiet. To judge by the look he gave us, this hypocrite Salter was muttering aloud that we were cheating and ruining him. We were copying *his* designs, undercutting *his* prices, stealing *his* customers. He got up and went to pay his bill listlessly just as I was putting a spoonful of Queen's pudding into my mouth. I was relieved when he gave an accusing nod to Phillimore as he passed our table. He did not speak. We saw him stand on the step of the restaurant for a moment, looking at the traffic; and when he at last chose to cross the road and walked

northward, I tried to work out which of our customers he was going to steal. But Phillimore said:

"Salter has an ulcerated stomach through living on tinned food on a hospital ship in the war. He was in the Middle East."

Phillimore said this in a subdued enthusiastic voice. The illness, the cheatings, the plots of Salter excited Phillimore's imagination. To my uncle he talked about nothing else for days.

The year passed and another year began. I found myself growing. I spent more time in the workroom now working with my hands. I would check the timber or the cloth or help with the packing or sort certain kinds of hair and down. I was not penned in the little glass room with Miss Croft. I was free to walk about. I liked the workroom because it had a glass roof and through that one sometimes saw the white clouds smoking in the sky, and I would think of the country you would be able to see if you could lie on top of one of those clouds. I liked to think that fields and woods existed, but that I too existed and was working. I wished I was in love and the wish itself was delightful, for there was no pain or melancholy in it, no emptiness and defeat. I was in love already. I had fallen in love with myself, a lover as close as my own skin.

One morning in May the firm was delivering some chairs in the West End, and I was sent in a hired van with them, riding high up with the driver, to see that the chairs were delivered without damage to an important special customer. I did not go straight back to the office. I left the van. Up till then I had never been in a restaurant north of the Thames, but now I decided to try a place in some narrow alley of the city. One after the other I rejected. The thoughtless traveller wanders in circles. I was delighted to wander and, in fact, wandered so long that I found myself near the office and in the teashop under the arches. There I saw a most remarkable person. No, not Salter. I saw Miss Croft.

A Miss Croft I had never seen in my life before, because I had never seen her outside the office. As surprised as I was, she blushed like a country rose, she smiled, she beckoned to me. Her awkwardness had gone, mine went too. Our eyes, our tongues were excited. I sat down at her table.

"Don't have the fish. It's awful," she said. "Dry."

"I won't have the poached egg either," I said.

These two sentences seemed brilliant to us. A beautiful waitress,

much more beautiful than Miss Croft, came up and looked at us sulkily. And the sneer on the waitress's face made us feel we were even more brilliant. We were escaped prisoners.

The new thing about Miss Croft was that she had put her hair up. Before it had hung, tied in a schoolgirlish black bow, on her shoulders. Now her head was lighter, like a flower which had long been sheathed by its leaves; and her body was lighter too. She parted her lips when she spoke instead of mumbling; the sisterly, sermonizing line had gone from her brows and she looked arch when she caught me looking at the two small hills in her white blouse and even leaned forward to tempt and confuse me more. For my part, I made one or two brilliant remarks about the people in the restaurant, remarks which made her say, "Oh, you are!"

"I'm coming to sit on your side of the table," I said, very encouraged, for I had the insane idea of putting my arm round her waist; but a waitress dropped a tray and I think Miss Croft did not hear me, for she began to talk very quickly about the only subject that really interested us: our daily bread, the air we breathed, the latest instalment of the inner story of Belton and Phillimore.

"Where did you take those chairs this morning?" she asked me. I parried this. I was not sure whether I was supposed to say.

"To Naseley, wasn't it?" she said.

"Yes."

"Mr Phillimore has gone to Somerset," she said, "to get money. Dadda says there's something going on." I ought to have said that when she wanted to give authority to anything she said she always quoted her father. She called him Dadda.

"Dadda says 'You wait—there's another man.'" She said this in the voice a woman uses when she says "There is another woman."

"I don't believe it," I said, not because I did not believe it, but because I did not like the idea of Miss Croft having a father.

"Mr Belton and Mr Naseley are on the phone to each other every day. When he says he's going out to a customer, he's going to see this Naseley. He knows I know. I can read faces."

She said this not in the moralizing, maternal way she had had a year before, but with a new feminine recklessness. She was tasting the new feminine delight in saying anything that came

into her head; and as she said this she leaned forward, touching the back of her hair and looking over the faces of the people in the restaurant, so that she could give me another chance of looking at her throat and her neck and have the pleasure of catching me do so.

"I can," she said, catching me. I coloured. And then she went on to soothe the wound:

"Why are you so vain?" she said. Then quickly changed to: "I said to Mr Phillimore, when he left to catch the train, 'I can read faces, Mr Phillimore.' He looked at me. You should have seen the look he gave. Really I'm sorry for that man. He said to me, 'Can you?' Just that, nothing more," she said, her small eyes brightening. She closed her handbag and said firmly:

"Dadda says Naseley and Belton will buy him out if he doesn't get that money from his mother." And she got up to go.

Two days later Phillimore returned from Somerset. It was clear, after he came out of my uncle's office, that there was a change in him. He had always been anxious to chatter with me, but for a while he said nothing to me. He nodded, stared, paused: there was that hissing intake of breath and then he said nothing. I became familiar.

"Coming out to lunch?" I called to him, forgetting to call him "sir". He looked at me coldly.

"No, Vincent," he said, "go to your beautiful waitress alone." And the next day.

"Not to-day, Vernon," he said, "but beware of the auburn glory at the Dyers and Cleaners."

And his Adam's apple came up offensively over the top of his collar.

He said these things before Miss Croft, who laughed at me. "Vincent is so susceptible," she said. She looked with yearning at Mr Phillimore. Always Mr Phillimore had made the advances to everyone; now when Miss Croft seemed to be lifting herself on a dish towards him, he was taken aback. He hesitated, open-mouthed. He looked around him, like a man surrounded by plots and enemies, and worked his way back to the door.

And now Miss Croft talked of nothing but Mr Phillimore. She would not leave till he left in the evening. She followed him to the end of the street. She watched his moods. She set her own by them. If he came into the room and went out without speaking,

she refused to speak to me or to answer my uncle. If he spoke, she would flirt with me, saying:

"He's so *serious*, Mr Phillimore. What shall we do with him?"

"Ah, youth!" began Mr Phillimore. Then he changed his mind and said in a savage way, "I'd know what I'd do with him if I were you, Miss Croft. Look into his eyes."

"Oh, don't, you'll make him shy."

"Innocent!" said Mr Phillimore. "Innocent eyes! How can you allow him to be innocent?"

Miss Croft blushed and turned indignantly away; but the indignation was for me. Both Phillimore and I gazed at her waist as she turned her back to us.

"Go away, both of you," said Miss Croft, stamping her foot. We both, to her annoyance, looked with astonishment at her foot and went away.

"The Croft," said Phillimore bitterly to me. "Do you fancy the embraces of the Croft?" In his most withering way, "All the indiscriminate vitality of a girl's secondary school going to waste," he said. "One almost has a duty . . . No, Vernon . . . With your energy, Vernon . . ."

It struck me that Mr Phillimore was a man to avoid. He felt himself betrayed and looked as though, now, blindly, he would betray us all. One morning he arrived at the office a little late. His hat was on the back of his head and he had a spectacle-case in his hand. It had a spring in the lid which made it go "Pop" when he closed it.

"Pop," said Mr Phillimore, snapping the spectacle-case at me.

"Pop," he said again, pointing it at Miss Croft. And then he put it to his forehead and said, "Pop. Brains everywhere. 'The balance of his mind was disturbed.'"

He smelled of peppermint. I followed him out of the room. He had an attaché-case in his hand. He half opened it; it was full of papers.

"Shall I just empty the lot on the top of the head of the chaste Miss Croft? Wager me I won't. Go on—wager me."

I was alarmed, but luckily Uncle was not there. We could hear his voice in the workroom. It really was remarkable that my Uncle Belton had no idea of what was going on.

"All right," I said.

Gloomily Phillimore picked up the attaché-case, held it upside

down with a finger on the lid and went back into Miss Croft's room.

"Good-bye, Mother," were the strange words which Mr Phillimore was muttering as he went in. Then he came out with the case still in his hands. "Vernon, the bird—if that is the word—has flown."

Poor Miss Croft had gone to cry in the lavatory.

Phillimore sat down for a little while, nodding his head, and slowly his vacant face settled into a terrifying scowl. He went out to the workroom, and at last Miss Croft came out. Her little eyes seemed to be full of pins and were pink-lidded with crying.

"He's drinking. Mr Belton knew he would start drinking if he went down to see his mother. He knew it. Where is he? Oh, I'm frightened. Don't let him come near me."

I saw her biting her lips. I put my arm round her, but she pushed me away.

"Dadda will make me give my notice when I tell him," she was sobbing. "He won't have me insulted."

"I didn't insult you," I said.

"Don't be a fool," said Miss Croft.

In the workroom when I went there I heard the sound of snoring. The packer was nailing up a case, hitting the nails as loudly as he could and giving a huge wink and a nod to the other men. They were nodding at Mr Phillimore, fast asleep on the heap of kapok. It was clinging to his trousers like burrs.

"He's been boozed up since four o'clock yes'day," said the foreman. He winked. "He's a case."

Mr Phillimore left the office when he woke up and went away with the foreman, who beckoned to two of his mates to come with them. Miss Croft and I stood on the step watching Mr Phillimore's hat, tipped back, wagging in a slowly advancing group of caps. Sometimes he stopped to put a hand on the foreman's shoulder and make a speech to him. A roar of laughter ended the speech, and a man on the outside of the group swivelled round with his hands in his pockets and made a flying kick at a stone. We saw no more of Mr Phillimore for a week. The people at the boarding-house where he lived telephoned to say he had influenza.

In the early days of their marriage my Uncle Belton would have called a taxi and raced to Mr Phillimore's bedside; but now, bemused by the advance of his infidelities with Mr Naseley, he

did nothing. But he did make a speech to me in the train, for the motion of a train and its isolation from the world encouraged moral reflection in my uncle.

"The important thing in life," Uncle Belton said to me, getting out a toothpick, "is to do the right thing. The Devil is always on the look-out for our weaknesses. Two and two make four, you can't argue with the law of progress. Phillimore can't argue with it any more than I can or you can, Vincent. I am disappointed in Mr Phillimore. I said to him, multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision, the servant who buried his talents was made to give to the others. Thou base and foolish servant. I don't want to influence nobody. I'm just putting the case as God sees it; and when Mr Naseley said something the other day about the partners in his firm, two brothers who don't get on—pretty dreadful that, isn't it, two brothers—I said, 'God is my partner.' Naseley said to me, 'By God, Belton, you're right.' I said, 'I'm not right. God is right. He will guide us.' By the way, I shouldn't mention Mr Naseley's name at the office. . . ."

After a week Mr Phillimore came back. He was wearing a new suit. He had a flower in his buttonhole. He whistled quietly to himself. Phillimore had improved his appearance by clipping his moustache. I do not know what passed between himself and my uncle except that I heard my uncle say, "Pull yourself together, Phillimore."

Phillimore's manner to me was an indication: "How's the Queen of Clapham, Vernon?" he said. "Dusting and tidying the eternal mantelpiece of her virginity?" Then he put his fingers under my chin and tipped it up. "What a bitch she must be, my poor boy," he said and walked away.

Miss Croft kept the door of her room open, hoping to catch sight of him. He came in at last. She was wearing a new, pale blue frock and when she walked she made sudden half turns so that we saw the silk swimming over the full line of her leg, and she frowned when she looked back. Phillimore stopped in the doorway and clicked his tongue loudly.

"Woman," he said, giving me a nudge. He looked very vulgar. She put on a puzzled expression which asked Mr Phillimore to explain. He just rolled his eyes. It was more than vulgar. She sat down quickly and began to type.

"I'm busy," she said. "Haven't you anything better to look at?"

"N'no. N'no," said Phillimore, advancing a step and leering.

"You are being rude, Mr Phillimore," she said. He was punctured. His boldness went. He tried to explain. She became angrier. He went.

"Sometimes," sighed Miss Croft, "I'm frightened of what that man will do." And added: "It's a new dress. Dadda says blue is my colour."

Phillimore said to me: "What have I done? What have you done, Vernon? Why is it that you and I are unspeakable in the eyes of that virgin? Because we must, a little while longer, presume she is one. We are innocent. We are children, Vernon. She plays with us. I beg of you, Vernon," he said, seizing me by the shoulders and looking into my eyes: his own eyes were wild as though a pack of wolves were racing out of them towards me, "I beg of you for the sake of the peace of this office, save us from that torture."

I laughed. I laughed and stepped away because I thought he was going to cry and to kiss me: no, chiefly because I thought by all this acting he was laughing at me.

The hours went slowly. I did the stock books, the invoice books; then in the late afternoon I had to go and help Uncle and Phillimore in the workroom. Phillimore left us. Uncle had taken it into his head to investigate a collection of chair-springs. He hated being helped, but if you were there he obliged you to stand there and watch. I had to wait a long time before I could get step by step away from him, but at last I managed it and got back to his office. The workmen had gone and I sat reading a trade paper. Phillimore was in Miss Croft's office, sitting in his hat and coat. He too was waiting for my uncle. Miss Croft was not there. She was washing her hands, and I saw her, through the open door, pass across the room and go to get her hat and coat. It was very quiet now the lathes had stopped, and the evening cries of children in the street could be heard now the traffic had gone.

Suddenly I heard Mr Phillimore's voice. It was bold and decisive, the voice he had been training for use on our telephone.

"Duckie," I heard him say. "Don't be cross." No answer.

"I say don't be cross."

"I'm not cross."

"You look it."

Miss Croft was picking up her things.

"I must fly," she said.

"Fly, fly," he said. "My wings are broken. The wings of youth are strong."

"Don't," said Miss Croft.

"Take me in your strong wings," said Mr Phillimore.

"Oh, don't," said Miss Croft.

Phillimore had got up, and they were now both out of my sight.

"On your strong wings . . ." he was saying.

"I must catch my train," she said.

"I am wrecked. My life is ruined . . ."

"I'll miss it if I don't dash," she said.

"Dash," he muttered very loudly. "Yes, dash. Don't you understand, I love you!" The sounds suggested that Mr Phillimore had jumped across the room, or was about to do so. A chair fell over. "You say, dash," I heard him say.

And then a screech came from Miss Croft. I ran into the room. There was Mr Phillimore with one foot standing on his hat, holding Miss Croft in his arms and trying to kiss her, and she was pushing away from him not with anger, but with an unnecessarily helpless, sulky expression.

"I'll miss my train," she was saying breathlessly. And then her face settled, she looked him in the eyes, stiffened, opened her mouth in a manner that I thought was inviting, but instead of a kiss a high, pure, perfectly calculated and piercing scream came out of her. It was a marvel. By the fight in her little eyes I would have said it was a challenge. She waited to see what Mr Phillimore would do. My uncle came running up the passage and arrived with a plonk like a bouncing ball in the room.

Phillimore loosened his grip and the girl wriggled away. At the sight of my uncle she broke into tears.

"I . . ." gasped Phillimore, "I—I—was—saying—good-bye—to Miss Croft."

"Phillimore," said my uncle.

"Good-bye," said Phillimore to me. He did not look at my uncle. "Dash," he said.

And before we knew more about it, he *had* dashed. He dashed from the room, and Uncle's new horn-rimmed glasses fell off.

"Oh—he's gone," said Miss Croft, looking at the empty doorway. We all looked at it. But in a second he was back, a

scornful face printed with derision which did not look at Miss Croft or myself, but stared at Uncle Belton.

"I forgot to tell you I'm joining Salters," he said ironically. And then his self-control went: "That's what you've all done to me." This time he went for good. Uncle Belton and Miss Croft stepped towards each other instinctively.

"Oh, Mr Belton, did you hear?" she said. "How awful!"

"Mr Belton," she said, "the deceit." She put her hand on my uncle's coat-sleeve; but he was simply staring. He always stood square-shouldered and now his shoulders seemed to spread wider. He was very pale, as pale as a loaf of bread. He still did not speak, but slowly sat down in a chair.

"The double-crossing swine," he said.

It was quite simple, my Uncle Belton explained to me. When he had seen that Mr Phillimore was not going to keep his promise and bring in more capital, he had had to look elsewhere. It was hard to credit, but Mr Phillimore thought he had been badly treated—said "I wasn't open with him"—and all the time he was seeing Salter! "But there is a law of justice in the world," Uncle said with a smile. "Salter is on the point of bankruptcy."

There were no more flowers on the desk now until Miss Croft started bringing them. She devoted herself to my uncle and every day came out with little pieces of news about the wickedness of Mr Phillimore. I saw him once, it must have been eighteen months later. He was standing on London Bridge looking up at a high building where a man was cleaning windows.

"I should die," I heard him say to someone in the crowd. Then he saw me. He bared his teeth as if he were going to spit, but changed his mind. His look suggested that I was the most ridiculous thing on earth, as he turned away.

X-Ray

THE X-ray department in the hospital is reached by tepid corridors. A swing door admits the noises of the street and with a gulp swallows you and rejects them. You are cut off from the world. Stairways lead upwards to the regions of pain, six floors carefully labelled and distributed; yet, passing the open doors of laboratories, seeing instruments and retorts, smelling ether which excites the nostrils, the body begins to feel important. It is bringing its talent of pain to the total.

The waiting-room stands between two doors; one swings and gulps like the street door, the other is fixed open and leads into a long room which is unnaturally light. The X-ray machine is screened by long brown curtains. There are four benches in the waiting-room and a high window, and none of the waiting people are speaking though the air is nervous with their wanting to speak. They look at one another and down at the light reflected in diagram on the polished floor. But it is not sun that lies there in a pool, you feel, but mere evidence of the existence of light. If to escape you look outside it is to see on one of the higher floors in another wing a man in a white coat holding up a test tube—a god, and the nurses who come and go up the iron fire-escapes outside are angels on Jacob's Ladder.

The immediate noises are particular and lively: the high heels of the starched nurses on the floor, the suction of the swing door when a patient is wheeled in on a stretcher or in a bath-chair, the fizzling, electric frying noise of the X-ray machine behind the curtains. It might be a steam press in a cleaner's shop, and you expect to see a cloud of steam blow up over the top of the curtains. The disembodied voice of a nurse says, "Lie down. Pull down the trousers to the knees. When I say 'Breathe gently,' hold the breath and do not breathe till I tell you. Put the arms above the head (this patient knows). Now breathe . . ."

The frying begins.

"Breathe out. Pull up the trousers. Get down. Dress. Go outside and wait. You may put your coat on." Each sentence is exact and part of a formula.

A nurse comes out and goes to the telephone. "X-ray department speaking. Is Sister there? Oh, Sister, you know that little boy Reeves? Well, we'll have to have him down again. The films haven't come out. His stomach's all full of gas."

A human expression of guilt comes over the waiting people. Are they, too, grossly and unscientifically full of gas? This starts conversation. The women are sitting opposite the men on different benches, in voluntary segregation. Among the women by mistake sits one chicken-breasted, trembling little man, stringy of skin, red-nosed and wearing a white choker. His knees are drawn up and are tight together. When the nurse comes in and says without interest, "Beale? Patient called Beale?" and there is no answer, a dozen heads naturally turn upon him. He must be Beale. And he is squeezing himself into his corner. "Beale?" The nurse steps forward to accuse him. He makes a noise that is Beale. She bends over him like a large white intoxicating flower. "Are you Beale?" He squeezes himself and makes another noise. "Beale," she says sternly, "you have come on the wrong day." He cowers. "You ought to have come last Thursday, not this." He stares at her and murmurs. "Why didn't you?" she says.

There is a movement of delight and pity. All gaze at Beale the hero, the idiot, the man who HAS COME ON THE WRONG DAY. The hospital goes on humming. The sunlight is still being generated. "I don't know what we shall do about you, Beale." And outside: "What's to be done about this man Beale, Sister?" His lot is beyond desolation. Other nurses come in and gaze at him. When *she* comes in again Beale grips his cap and thinks he ought to stand up when a lady is talking to him. "Sit down," says the nurse. "Don't stand, Beale. Sit down." It is terrifying for him to sit down. Then she says in a deep enticing voice, "Go into that room." He stares. "Get up and go into that room."

He gets up and hesitates in a muddle, trembling and looking at the doors and window.

"Over here, Beale," she says. "Into that dressing-room."

He is shuffling about the room, quite lost, glancing at her like a dog. Now his lips are tight, now they are loose. She leads him by the elbow as he stutters something. "Beale, take off your coat and waistcoat, loosen your trousers, put on a dressing-gown. When you have done that, come out and wait."

The door closes on Beale. Everyone waits and waits for him to

come out. But he does not come out. People begin to smile and nod significantly at the door. "Coo," says a girl, who is very pale and has large round dark eyes like a surprised half-caste doll. She has her hand over her lips. "Oh dear," she says. She cannot stop giggling with awe. "I'm that hungry," she says. "They do play you up. No breakfast. Did they make you take some stuff?"

This, of course, to the strong man of the room. He sits like a cowed boxer gone to fat, a massive mottled man with a broken nose, rather scared and absurdly friendly. He is always jumping up to open doors for nurses and wants to talk to everyone. "You have to take it," he says with authority. "Yes," says the girl, shocked at herself. "I'm going to have something quick when I get out of this."

"They're not open yet," says the bruiser. People sigh and smile. Their eyes shine for a moment and go dead again. "Oh dear," says the girl, rolling her eyes and holding her empty stomach. "Yus," says the bruiser, shaking his head.

The door opens and in comes a woman who knows what she is doing, walks straight to the bench, gives it a whisk with a newspaper, sits down and puts her bright pop-eyes into the *Daily Mirror*, and hums. In a moment she might twitter like a canary. She wears a bright blue dressing-gown and nods to all the nurses. She is the efficient spinster settling with the glee of a bird. She has come to stay. But she is only the harbinger of a richer disturbance. Far doors are heard swinging. The curtains suck in and belly out wide, a warm cyclone is coming. Nurses scatter to the walls, and suddenly there appears with great strides a tall red-haired doctor, fat, whiskered and gleaming, cannibal, with his white coat flying behind him and out of it great legs leaping with the gusto of striped tigers. He dashes through the sun, a hand covered with golden hairs shoots out of his sleeve, back flies the swing door and he is gone, the spices of the Indies with him. Thermometers have risen. But when the air has settled again, the nurse comes and intones, "Beale," looking at the empty corner. Where is Beale? What is he doing in that room? Is he praying or weeping, or has he hanged himself? With what awful garments is he struggling? Will he be found crushed on the heel of the doctor's shoe?

"He hasn't come out, miss," says the bruiser, the reformed boy of the class. Everyone is smiling with expectation except the

spinster, wetting their lips for the entrance of Beale. A lanky man with a lot of hair who wriggles, smells of tobacco, bites his nails and looks like a barber, slaps his knee with a long hand and says, "Oh, flick!"

"Ssh," says the bruise. The nurse opens the dressing-room door, and although it is a room no bigger than a bathing-box her voice sounds as if she were bending down and talking to something under the seat. "Come on, Beale," she says. "Come with me." And out comes Beale with his trousers collapsing and his braces on the floor, lost in the huge dressing-gown except for a head that is like that of an unfledged bird. He opens his mouth several times, but no words come, only noise. The women are now very pitiful as he is led into the next room behind the curtains. The bruise spreads his legs and puts his hands on his knees. The barber doubles himself up with expectancy. An old man who has been wheeled in in a bath-chair snuffles. The spinster goes on reading. From behind the curtains come the familiar voices, the familiar hum of the hospital. Up the iron staircase outside a nurse rises with a tray, an offering to the god.

Suddenly there is a loud humming sound, a cool voice, "When I say 'Breathe gently,' breathe gently and hold it till I tell you to breathe out. The arms at the sides. Now 'Breathe gently.' Hold it. . . ."

"Whoops! Off we go," exclaims the bruise in a loud voice, as the electricity crackles. "He's copped it."

"Oooh dear," says the girl, showing large foolish teeth. Perhaps Beale has been sawn in two. But Beale returns whole, looking behind him suspiciously, and takes his seat among the women at the back, sitting in the sunlight at the window like a fly. The spinster goes. "Me?" she says brightly. She takes her *Daily Mirror* with her. It is she who never returns. They have probably put her to sing in a golden cage. The bruise is called. He swallows and grimaces at the girl, who watches him go from the room. In a few minutes he returns, smiling sheepishly. "It don't hurt," he boasts to her. "They put something on top of you. Pouf, it's heavy, but that's all."

But he is surprised he is still alive, and so is everyone else. Beale was half dead already—but this man: it had sounded as if he were being ironed out flat and here he is in three dimensions, the whole seventeen stone of him. When he sits down, he looks

back to the curtains rather pleased with himself, nodding his head with approval of the process as it is repeated, rather like someone who has been called on to the stage by a conjurer. What happens next? Can he help again?

"Do they let you see yourself?" asks the barber.

"Nao," says the bruiser. "What you think you are inside? A family group?"

The bruiser and the barber go, the women go, only Beale is left. After a long while the nurse says, "Oh, Beale, we shall want you on Saturday at nine. Will you remember Saturday at nine? This Saturday. Take no aperient." Beale looks up through his long eye-lashes with eyes so tightly crinkled that they are no bigger than a pair of fleas. Very slowly his lips draw back and show six strong yellow teeth. He makes a noise. He is called back from three wrong doors. "This way, Beale," says the nurse.

The Landlord

IT was due to the boldness of Mrs Seugar, who always got what she wanted, that they came to live in the semi-detached house called East Wind. They were driving through that part of the town one Sunday: Mrs Seugar was bouncing on the seat and sighing: "Snobby district. I like it snobby, refined, a bit of class." And her little eyes, like caterpillars' heads, began eating up everything they passed until she saw East Wind. The adjoining house was called West Wind. "Oh, stop!" she called out. "Look—posh! That's the house I want. You could live in a house like that. I mean, be one of the toffs and look down your nose at everyone. I don't mean anything nasty. Get out and see if they'll sell it."

Wherever Mrs Seugar moved, a spotlight played on her; but Mr Seugar lived in a deep, damp-eyed shade of shame, the shame of always obliging someone. Unable to step out of it, he had shuffled a lot of money out of his shop into his pocket and piled it on to Mrs Seugar, who stood out in the spotlight seeing that she was taken notice of. Mr and Mrs Seugar left the car, went to the house, and were asked in by the man who was to be their landlord. He was having tea in a room shabby with pictures and books, a very tall man with nothing to remark about him except that as the Seugars advanced he retreated, slipped back like a fish with eyes like lamps and with a coarse little open mouth. Mrs Seugar sat herself down and let her legs fall open like a pair of doors.

"I have set my heart on your house. Oh, it's posh, cute," she said. "Isn't it? Haven't I?" Mr Seugar, with his knees together, confirmed it.

"Would you sell it to us?" Mrs Seugar said.

The landlord poured them out two cups of tea and slipped back into the corner, watching them as if he were having a dream of being robbed. (In the end, it was he who robbed them. A scholar and gentleman, he asked a tremendous price: Mrs Seugar was knobbed with jewelry.) But first of all he put them off. They could have not this house but the one next door, he said.

"I own both."

"Who lives next door?" said Mrs Seugar. "Ask him who lives next door. Why should *I* talk—oh, it's so posh," she said, elbowing her husband. "You make me wear out my voice."

"Who . . .?" began Mr Seugar.

"No one," said the landlord.

"Then you can move in next door and we can move in here," cried Mrs Seugar. "What did I say? Would you believe it—I said to my husband, that's the house I want, go and ask, but he wouldn't. He makes objections to everything—well, I call it daft to make objections all the time. It makes people look down on me for marrying him. I don't mean anything nasty."

The shadow of shame came down like a dark shop-blind over Mr Seugar, and indeed that is where his mind was—in his shop. In half an hour the landlord was showing them round the house, Mr Seugar following them like a sin, giving a glance into every room after the other two had gone on, being called forward for lagging behind. When the visit was done, Mr Seugar bought the house, wiping his feet up and down on the carpet as he did so, crying inside himself at the tremendous price; and bewildered because, in buying something that could not be wrapped up in paper and slipped into his overcoat pocket, he felt exposed.

When they got home and shut their door, Mrs Seugar began to shout everything she said. He was snobby (the landlord), it was a pleasure to hear him talk the way the snobs talk, la-di-da! It was lovely; but if you haven't the cash, it doesn't help you being a snob. She felt at ease having someone to look down on straight away.

"He's a recluse," said Mr Seugar.

"He isn't," shouted Mrs Seugar, grabbing him back from her husband. "He never stopped staring at me. I could have died," shouted Mrs Seugar. "Fancy him letting us have the house like that, no questions. It's barmy. Funny thing, him living in that house all his life—he must have got pig-sick of it—and me killing myself to have it, it shows what I say, you never know. You say I'm mad."

At the end of the month Mrs Seugar led her furniture into East Wind, and when it was all in, Mr Seugar followed it like a mourner. They settled in and Mrs Seugar sat there with her legs wide open and her shoes kicked off, going through the names of

all the people she was going to look down her nose at. "Listen," said Mr Seugar from the shade. No shop-bell to call them, no one popping in from down street; they were hearing the only sound in their lives: the landlord poking his fire in the house next door.

"Talk!" said his wife to him. "But for me you wouldn't be here. Say something. Not business. Talk. Talk snobby. Oh," sighed Mrs Seugar. "I bet you talk in the shop. I've got everything on," she said, having a look at her gold watch, her diamond brooch and so on, "and I feel a fool, you sitting with your trap closed. A snob would talk."

At that moment they both started. The front door was being opened, shoes were being wiped on the mat, there were steps in the hall.

"What's that?" said Mr Seugar.

"Burglars, I'd welcome it," said Mrs Seugar.

Mr Seugar went out and met their landlord walking down the hall. He was just putting a key into his pocket. He was surprised by Mr Seugar, murmured something, walked on and then was stopped by the sight of their stair carpet. Murmuring again, he flicked like a fish sideways into the sitting-room, looked at Mrs Seugar in a lost way and then sat down.

"I've been for a walk," he said.

"A constitootional," said Mr Seugar.

"Shut up, Henry," said Mrs Seugar, "until remarks are addressed to you."

The landlord looked round the room, where his pictures and his books had been, and then glanced at the Seugars.

"Dreadfully late," he said suddenly, went to the window, which was a low one, opened it and stepped over the sill. Once over, he walked down the garden into his own garden next door.

"Dreadfully, awfully, frightfully—late," Mrs Seugar was repeating in ecstasy.

Mr Seugar came out of his shame:

"Blimey. See that? Forgot he's moved! He's still got the key."

A terrible quarrel broke out between the Seugars. That was a call, Mrs Seugar said. No, it wasn't, said Mr Seugar, it was a mistake. Mr Seugar was so ill-bred he hadn't realized it was a call, but must pass remarks. If a visitor says "walk", you don't say "constitootional" afterwards, correcting him. Why repeat?

It's daft. Not only that; he came to see her, not Mr Seugar. A man, Mrs Seugar said, was what she wanted, her ideal, who talked soft and gave you a good time, a lovely man, not the fairy prince and all that twaddle, but a recluse who could fascinate you and give you things.

"Out of mean spite you gave him the bird," she said to Mr Seugar. Mr Seugar did not know what to do. At last he got a spade and went out to the garden to dig.

The next day, just as lunch was put on the table, in came the landlord, walked straight into the dining-room ahead of Mr Seugar, sat down in Mr Seugar's place before the joint and started to carve.

"Henry!" Mrs Seugar warned her husband.

Mr Seugar said nothing. Their landlord handed them their plates and then rang the bell for an extra one. Mrs Seugar talked about her summer holiday. People were stand-offish there, she said, and she couldn't get a corset.

"I apologize for the beef," said the landlord.

Mrs Seugar kicked Mr Seugar under the table.

"D'you believe millions now living will never die?" asked Mrs Seugar to keep conversation going. "I mean, they'll live, not pass out. It sounds daft. We had a circular. We put up a notice saying No Hawkers—No Circulars, but that doesn't stop some people. Not never die, they must be fools to think that, what some people's minds get on, they must be empty. I want a bit of life. I'm not morbid."

"Millions now living?" said the landlord. "Will never die?"

"I'm surprised," said Mrs Seugar, "they are allowed to give out circulars like that in a neighbourhood like this."

"I am sorry, I do apologize for the sweet," said the landlord. "It is my fault. I am awfully thoughtless. I will make a confession."

"A confession. Oh!" cried Mrs Seugar, clapping her hands.

"It is terrible," said the landlord. It was one of his longest speeches. "I forgot I asked you to lunch."

"Henry," said Mrs Seugar. "Close your mouth, we don't want to see what you've eaten."

Presently the landlord looked at the pattern on the plates, then at the table, then at the walls. He got up and, murmuring, went suddenly out.

"You can see what has happened," said Mrs Seugar.

"What I said yes'day, day before," said Mr Seugar.

They sat there dwindling at the table, terrified.

"He's barmy," said Mr Seugar humbly—the customer is always right. "He's forgot he's moved. Like people who order the same groceries twice."

"Father," said Mrs Seugar—she always called him Father when she was accusing him: he had failed in this respect. "Ever since we've been up here you've shown you're not used to it. Why didn't you tell me you asked him in for a bite?"

"Who carved the joint? Am I barmy, or is he?" said Mr Seugar.

"I was glad for him to carve. It used to be his house. I have manners if some people haven't," said Mrs Seugar.

Mr Seugar began one of his long, low, ashamed laughs, a laugh so common that Mrs Seugar said he could keep that for the next time. Mr Seugar stopped suddenly and kept it for that. He had kept so many things for the next time in his life that they got stale.

"If any person calls to be laughed at, it's you, Father," said Mrs Seugar. Mr Seugar waited till she went out of the room and then did a small dance, which he stopped in alarm when he caught sight of himself in the mirror. A blush darkened his face and he went out to dig in the garden. Later, his wife brought out a cap for him to wear; she didn't, she said, like to see a man digging without his cap.

If they had had a cat or a dog, Mrs Seugar said, it would have been just the same; why make a difference when it was a human being who came in at the front door, said a word or two in the sitting-room and went out by the window? For all the time she was left alone, Mrs Seugar said, it was company.

"It's a man," said Mrs Seugar.

"What's he say?" said Mr Seugar.

"It isn't what he says," Mrs. Seugar said. "With those snobby ones it is the way they say it, it's what d'you call it, that pansy drawl. I love it. He likes to hear me talk."

"Oh," said Mr Seugar.

"Yes," said Mrs Seugar. "Why?"

"I just said 'Oh'," said Mr Seugar. "I'll try the window myself." And copying the landlord, Mr Seugar himself stepped over the sill into the garden to his digging.

"That isn't funny, it's vulgar," called Mrs Seugar after him.

Mr Seugar said, "Oh, sorry. No harm," and came back over the sill into the room and went out the proper way to put things right.

One evening the following week he met their landlord coming downstairs fast in his slippers.

Mr Seugar went into his store-room at the shop on early closing day and sat on a sack of lentils. He was trying to get a few things clear in his mind. "He sold me the house. I bought it. But I hadn't the right to buy it, there was no notice up." Suddenly the truth was clear to him. "I bought *him* as well. He was thrown in. It's like sand in the sugar."

And then the cure occurred to him. Mr Seugar went home to his wife and said:

"We must arst him in. We've never arst him in. If we arst him he'd see his mistake."

"He never wanted us to have this house," said Mrs Seugar. Once a month she suffered from remorse. "We oughtn't to have done it. It's a judgment."

"Arst him."

They laid out a table of ham and cake and tea and put a bottle of port wine on the sideboard. Mr Seugar lit a whiff to make the hall smell and went all over the house to be sure the landlord wasn't there already, and then walked up and down there until he arrived. He came at last and gave a long hand to Mr Seugar.

"I hope you are comfortably settled. I ought to have come before, but I have been very busy. I must go and present my apologies to Mrs S . . ." said the landlord.

"We have been meaning to ask you a long time," said Mrs Seugar.

"I go away so often," said the landlord.

"You live next door to people all your life and never see them," said Mrs Seugar, "yet someone from the other end of the earth you keep running into. How long is it since you've spoken a word to the people in the fish shop next door, Henry?"

"This morning," said Mr Seugar.

"Don't tell lies," Mrs Seugar said. "Ten years more like it."

Mrs Seugar drank a glass of port and went red. An evening of pleasure succeeded. They were celebrating the normality of their landlord.

"Is a woman's life what you call over at forty-five?" asked Mrs

Seugar. "You work, and what is there? You can't settle, you wish you could, but no, you must be up looking out of the window. *You* have settled. You've got your books, you can read. I can't, it's daft, I can't lose myself in something. If I could *lose* myself!"

Their landlord looked at Mr and Mrs Seugar and they could see he was appreciating them. Mrs Seugar's voice went like a lawn-mower running over the same strip of grass, up and down, up and down, catching Mr Seugar like a stone in the cutters every now and then, and then running on again. They had a long conversation about boiler coke. It turned out that their landlord used anthracite, which did not affect the lungs, and Mr Seugar said they had paraffin at the shop in his father's time.

There was a pause in the conversation. The landlord looked at the clock and yawned. Presently he knelt down and they thought he was tying his boot-laces; he was untying them. He took his shoes off, then his collar and tie, unbuttoned his waistcoat.

"If you will forgive me," he said, "I'll go to bed now. Don't let me break up the party. I'll just slip off. You know your rooms."

"Sssh," said Mrs Seugar when he had gone. "Say nothing. Listen."

Mr and Mrs Seugar sat like the condemned in their chairs. They heard their landlord go upstairs. They heard him walking in their rooms above. Then evidently he discovered his mistake, for they heard him rush downstairs and out of the house, banging the door after him. The following night Mr Seugar went up to their bedroom at nine o'clock to get some matches and found their landlord, fast asleep, in their bed.

Service was always Mr Seugar's motto. He bent slightly over the bed, rubbing his hands. "And the next pleasure?" he appeared to say.

Mrs Seugar came in. When she saw their landlord lying in his shirt, half out of the bedclothes, she made one of her sudden strides forward, squared her chins and her cheeks and made a grab at her husband's pyjamas, which had been thrown on the bed. At the same time she gave him a punch that sent him through the doorway, and threw the pyjamas after him. "Take those things away," she said.

Mr Seugar was an inhuman man; he was not sorry for himself, but he was sorry for his pyjamas. He picked them up. As he did

this, he saw Mrs Seugar settling into an attitude of repose and heaving her breath into position. From Mr Seugar's point of view, on the fourth stair outside and on an eye-level with his wife's ankles, never had Mrs Seugar seemed more beautiful; it was as if she were eating something that agreed with her and that other people could not get.

"Where are yours?" whispered Mr Seugar emotionally.

Mrs Seugar never answered questions. Now she came out of the room and quietly closed the door. "So refined!" she said. "His mouth was shut."

Mr Seugar opened his mouth at once. He and Mrs Seugar had not slept apart for twenty-eight years and, in a voice irrigated by what with him passed for feeling, Mr Seugar mentioned this fact.

A new contralto voice came from Mrs Seugar's bosom. "There are times," she said, "when a woman wants to be alone. I'll take the spare room."

And what Mrs Seugar said she would take, she always took. In the spare room she lay awake half the night going over the past twenty-eight years of her life with a tooth comb. You make your circumstances or they make you, she thought. Which is it?

By "circumstances" she meant, of course, Mr Seugar, who lay on the living-room sofa frivolously listening to the varying notes of the springs. An extraordinary dream came to him that night. He dreamed that thieves had removed the ham-and-bacon counter from his shop. At six o'clock he woke up, put on an overcoat, and went up to what was, after all, his bedroom. The landlord had gone. Mr Seugar put his hand under one of the pillows and pulled out his wife's nightdress and threw it into the corner with his pyjamas when he had taken them off. Unfairness was what he hated.

"If I had had a different life," said Mrs Seugar to her friends, "things would have been different for me. I sacrificed myself, but when you're young you don't know what you're doing. I don't mean anything nasty against Father, he's done what he could, it's wonderful considering . . ."

Mr Seugar went out and played bowls when the shop was closed. He pitched the ball down the green, watching it as it rolled, and when it stopped he called out:

"How does that smell?"

The fishmonger at the other end called back:

"Strong."

But what Mr Seugar was really thinking as he pitched the ball was:

"I lay he's in the kitchen making tea." Or "I lay a pound he's having a bath." Or "What you bet he's gone to bed?" Mr Seugar was a betting man by nature. He would bet anyone anything, only they did not know he was doing so. "It's a mug's game," Mr Seugar said, knowing that he was a mug. He did not bet only on the bowling green; he betted while he was digging in the garden, turning round suddenly and looking at the windows of both houses to see if anything had happened while his back was turned. A starling on the chimney would give him a start and he would stick the spade in the ground and go inside to see what had happened. One day, when he thought he had betted on everything his landlord could possibly do, he met him upstairs on the landing of the house.

"Are you looking for someone?" said Mr Seugar, leaning forward over an imaginary counter as he spoke.

"Yes," said the landlord, and walked on, disregarding Mr Seugar as he always did, like a customer moving on to the next counter.

"My wife," said Mr Seugar, always one to oblige, "is in the sitting-room."

The landlord stopped and considered Mr Seugar with astonishment.

"*Your* wife!" he said.

"Oh," screamed Mr Seugar—the scream was inside him, in his soul, and was not audible. "Oh," he screamed. "The deception. I never thought of that."

He saw how he had been diddled. He went out into the garden and dug, dug, dug. Worm after worm turned in the damp soil. "I am mad," said Mr Seugar. Mr Seugar dropped his spade and, pulling out his key, he opened his mouth, put on a fish-like expression and went round to his landlord's house. He let himself in. Out of the study came the landlord.

"Good morning," said the landlord.

Mr Seugar did not answer, but marched up the stairs and had a bath. After that he came down to the study. His landlord had gone, but Mr Seugar sat there in front of the fire. Then, in order to annoy them next door, poked the fire.

Aunt Gertrude

THE name of the street where my Aunt Gertrude lived was Dorinda Gardens. The house was a new one with builders' putty, a tin of undercoating and a roll of wallpaper in the attic. A smell of paint and size was on the stairs, and a shop smell still in the carpets, the upholstery and the new furniture. Uncle owned the house, too, as a mortgagee, and that, Aunt said, was a new thing for him. There was the pride of being one of a regiment in this house, for it was one of several hundred, each with a small white balcony over the front door. The balcony had seduced Uncle. He said one could have breakfast on it "like they did on the Riveera," and in his imagination I am sure he did so, though there was room for only one person to stand on it and certainly there was no room for a table. A railway lay in a shallow green cutting at the end of the back garden, and in front were two plots of waste land which had not yet been sold. From the bedroom, where I sometimes went in the afternoon when Aunt Gertrude was lying down, one could see a hoarding standing in the field, with the words Easipay Estates Ltd. Ideal Sites for Ideal Houses.

The waste grass was spiked with thistles, lumpy with old horse manure, where yellow flies congregated. From Uncle we understood we were in Ideal Surroundings, but to us three boys the paddock was the snag of evil. Its wildness fascinated us and we loosened a paling in order to creep in and smoke our first cigarettes among its dungy stench, feeling that here was the native place of sin. Rusted kettles, a sour heap of old rags and the sight of a prowling dog which looked savage as it ran sniffing in the hot climate of this enclosure, gave us the fright we longed for. One day as we looked through, Harold said, "There's a man." The man was making water in a corner. We moved off. The man had confirmed our belief in the horror of the place.

There was a small passe-partout picture in the hall of my aunt's house which defined our lives. It was a picture of a letter-

box with a letter sticking out of it, and on the letter in good writing was the address:

Messrs Sell and Repent,
Prosperous Place,
The Earth.

"Some sell and wish they hadn't," said Uncle Smith, cocking a shrewd, pleased eyebrow at the picture.

"Buy and repent you mean," said Aunt Gertrude, whose face used to puff into small lumps when she was contradicting. If Uncle Smith was the sun of the house, Aunt Gertrude was the critical and watery moon, ringed with omens of bad weather.

There was a canal at the end of Dorinda Gardens, the road went over it by a bridge, and from the bridge one saw the slow worm of water pass under the girders of the railway. The days were warming and summer was blistering the new paint of the doors. One Sunday Aunt Gertrude said to Harold, her eldest son:

"Where's your dad? What's he doing?"

"S'upstairs, mum."

"He's a long time," said Aunt Gertrude.

She was tied to her husband by fear. He was out all day and sometimes he would be away for two or three nights, and in these absences she sank back into an undercurrent of uneasiness. His absences, even in another room, had the same effect on her as the silences of a child. What calamity had occurred? She was far from being one of those women who have the pose of treating their husbands as children. She was afraid of him, and she knew it.

"Pop up and see," said Aunt to Harold, but he did not want to go.

A time passed and then Uncle came downstairs. He was a quiet and secretive walker. He opened the kitchen door.

"Gert," he said.

We gaped at him. He had dressed himself in a dark blue blazer with the initials H.B.S. worked on the pocket, white flannel trousers, white boots, and on his head was a yachting cap. He kept his right hand in his blazer pocket.

He smiled shyly and modestly.

"I thought I'd take you for a row on the canal."

We all laughed until he blushed like a boy. He had to laugh too.

"What's the joke? I see no joke," he said, grinning.

"Where did you get that hat?" called Harold.

"No need to be vulgar," Uncle said, with a smirk. "We may not have a yacht, but we're close to the water."

Aunt stopped laughing, and into her face came a glint of fear such as she always had whenever he did a new thing.

"Look at your mother," said Uncle to Leslie. "Pretending she's never been in a boat. We used to go out every Sunday when we were courting."

"I was a young limb," said Aunt Gertrude tenderly and dreamily; but while there was a glow in Uncle's dreams, Aunt Gertrude's had an edge to them and suggested that if anyone went back with her into her memories, they would get their hands scratched or their clothes torn.

We did not go rowing on the canal. There were no boats. But we walked down to the bridge, Uncle still in his regalia. We saw men fishing in the oil-green water, and the thundery marble of summer clouds crested as white as cherry blossom and very still over our heads, as if the London sky were in a glass case. The men sat in the stillness smoking their pipes and watching their floats. Or, leaving their rods, they went for short circular walks and grunted to one another. While we watched from the bridge, one of the men whipped up his line. There was the squeal of rapid winding and at the end of the line was a fish like a slip of dancing tin. Uncle took us down to the towpath and the man showed us the fish.

"That's what we ought to do," said Uncle. "We're on the water. We ought to catch our own fish. Imagine herrings straight out of the river."

He said this to Aunt Gertrude when we got back. "You don't get herrings in rivers," she said tartly.

This genuinely astonished Uncle, but he recovered.

"Imagine it!" he cried, giving her a smack on the bottom.

"Ah, come on, old girl," he bullied. "Cheer up. Imagine it!"

Our only visitor at Dorinda Gardens was my Grandma Carter. She came in her black bead bonnet, her red nose and the red-

rimmed eyes showing like knife-cuts through her black veil, and wearing a black cape of some shiny material, the death-watch beetle of grief. She carried a string bag with her, for wherever she went she seemed always to travel with a few groceries, some sewing and a bottle of stout. There was the smell of the sharp grocer's about her, something compounded of tea, biscuits, bacon and pickles, and her tongue was the vinegar. Grief, one thinks, should purge and exalt the soul, but it had made her ugly, bad-tempered and given her also a morbid shuffling humility, a look of guilt and shame. She came every Wednesday to see us, and she would suddenly appear, letting herself in by the back door and saying every time apologetically:

"I came round the back, Gert dear, because I see you done your front." Then she pushed back her veil to the bridge of her nose, and turning slowly in a circle as a dog does before it lies down to sleep, she would give a sniff and put her string bag down on a chair. Her loneliness, her unhappiness and her snuffling made us afraid.

Aunt Gertrude was very guarded with her mother, for Gran had a tongue.

"Where d'you get that from?" Grandma Carter would exclaim at once, pointing perhaps at the coat and umbrella stand in the hall. She was very jealous of her daughter's new furniture.

"Horace bought it at Freebody's."

"What's wrong with a hook and two nails?" Gran sniffed. "Now I've come round to see what's happening to my boy's money." I, of course, was her boy; but so many she had loved had repaid her treacherously by dying that she was distant and suspicious and erratic in the show of affection to me. She had had a scare when she thought she might be landed with me when my mother died. Gran gave me a whiskered kiss which smelled of sugar-bags, and tears came off her face on to mine. She was small, but there was something muscular in her grip when she hugged me and she would tell Aunt of the dozens of times when "the poor lamb" (myself) had shown that I regarded her as a second mother—a delusion, for Gran terrified me. Gran's life was filled with guilt towards the living, whom she looked at slyly, and her tears were not tears of sorrow, but issued to conceal this guilt. She was guilty because she forgot the living and neglected them in her absorption with the dead.

When they had settled down and Grandma Carter had asked perfunctorily after her son-in-law with a "How's Smith?" Aunt Gertrude asked after Gran's lodgers. They were never called lodgers.

"How is . . . er . . ." Aunt said, not finishing the sentence and looking up at the silk shade over the gas-bracket in the middle of the room.

"Studying for his . . ." Gran replied, nodding with a genteel expression. The word "examination" suggested a rare, upper atmosphere which it did not become her to investigate or even mention.

After this Aunt and Gran got down to the dead. The two women raised them and wept. Poor Flo, how she had suffered; my father's cough, that horse which had kicked my grandfather—the horse had died too, for they had had it shot—then Harry being taken and the brightness of my mother, her last words—some dispute about them—and then poor Great-Aunt Emily, her last years darkened, and her brother Wilf, the deaf fishmonger. Having exhausted the human dead, unwrapping the cerements of memory and gazing at the closed faces, Aunt and Gran would feel hungry, as if death had been their appetizer, and would get out the beetroot, the vinegar and the mutton bone. Aunt called from the kitchen in a high giggling voice:

"Gran! Gran!"

"Yes, dear?"

"I was thinking of Aunt Emily's dog Rover." And Aunt went off into a shriek of laughter. "How it went away that night, do you remember? And they found it two days later drowned in the canal!"

Aunt came in holding the mutton bone in her hand, waving it as she laughed, and they both laughed and laughed till they had to sit down.

"Don't be so reel, Ma," said Aunt Gertrude. "It's wicked to laugh. She loved that dog. Oh, don't, I'll die. . . ."

"Emily was a fool about that dog," said Gran Carter to steady their laughter.

But Aunt was "off" now, "off" being Gran's word for it. She remembered other dogs, then Wilf's jackdaw, Flo's goldfish, my mother's canary, which Aunt Gertrude's cat had got when they were young—for there was a jealousy between the sisters and

Aunt was always guilty about having left the cage door open—human beings had given place to animals and birds. And then Aunt's face and Gran's straightened and the two women ended with the horse which had given Gran's husband the fatal kick.

"I'll never forget the day poor Jessie was shot." The purgation was complete, Gran started to admire all the new furniture now and said, "Smith's paid for it, I hope," and a defiance came into Aunt Gertrude's salty green eyes and she said, "Yes, he has." And then Gran went. She took a roll of wallpaper that day to paper her closet. She was an active woman and a natural picker up of trifles by the way.

Women are the terrors, the sergeant-majors of childhood. Their hard quick fingers pull at the neck, get at your ears, strain at buttons, one moment they are cuffing, the next they are hugging. Their moods last about a quarter of an hour. It's easy to scare them, simple to delude them. . . . Not all women. My mother was not like this. Our shop must have put some order into her femininity. But Aunt Gertrude had the disorder of a story. When she wasn't weeping she was laughing, swaying up and down and covering her face with her hands, or she was in a temper, or she was sulking. She sulked when she was tired of us, especially when Uncle was away for a day or two, waiting for him to come home. She was not a beautiful woman, but the nearer the time of his return came, her restless face calmed in a sulk which was a kind of beauty. She set her yellow hair under a net until it was as firm as a scone, her underlip drooped and the pupils of her grey eyes turned darker, almost blue. She put on her best dress and watered a small fern in the middle of the table and sat in the front room without moving. It made her rather impressive that in the middle of the afternoon she had had a bath and we had to keep away from her so as not to spoil her clothes. She was one of those fair, freckled women who sweat easily, and after a bath the smell, half of soap and half hay-like, of her skin put an excitement into the air, as if we were walking in a summer field. Harold, her son, was in love with her at these times, and spoke very piously and devotedly and kept us away from her. He wanted her to stay like this and did not want his father to return. But she was not in love with her son.

"Why don't you behave yourself like this all the time?" she said sarcastically to him. Harold had the sanctimoniousness of a once-spoiled and now easily envious eldest child. She preferred Leslie, the younger boy, at this moment, because he too was longing for Uncle to come back and stood for hours at the window. The time when she was in love with Harold was just after Uncle had gone away; but Harold was excited by freedom then and did not want her.

Aunt Gertrude was like a book of stories to me. When there were holidays I would leave the boys who were playing in the garden or the kitchen, pretending to them I was going to the lavatory. I would go upstairs and try to get into Aunt Gertrude's bedroom, where she used to lie down in the afternoon.

"Who's that? Stop fiddling at the door. What do you want?"

I got into the habit of going there and standing at the window, watching the road and telling her what was happening. A wide road, sandy; the hoarding opposite; a dog in the paddock; a pile of new bricks in the lot which had been sold.

"There goes the lady with the dog."

Once or twice Aunt got off the bed when I said this. She lay on the bed in a pair of grey bloomers and a loose vest with her thick hair down over her shoulders so that her face seemed to be looking out of the flap of a hairy tent, like a savage's. She got off the bed and kicked the chamber pot and peeped through the curtains. The tall grey-haired woman with the dog fascinated my aunt.

"There she goes," she repeated to herself. "Look at her. And the dog." It was a fox terrier.

"She's a lady," Aunt Gertrude said in a dreamy voice, coming away and pushing the chamber pot under the bed in a refined way. "She spoke to me in the grocer's. Her little dog got its lead all twisted up round me and she said,"—here Aunt imitated the woman's accent—" 'Ooh, Ai'm soo sorr'eh.' 'Ooh noo reely, it's quite all right,' I said. I could see she was a lady. 'Ooh, but mai leetle dawg is being ai nuis-ance. Come heah, Tiny.' And she smiled. 'Ooh, don't mention it,' I said."

Now she was out of bed, Aunt sat at her dressing-table. Like all the other furniture it was new; the price of the dressing-table was marked in blue chalk on the back of the mirror. I looked at her. She had slim arms and small shoulders and the skin, except at the

armpits where it was the colour of dry yellow grass, was very white. She told me to have another look at the window, and, when I obeyed, with a furtive blush, she took her clothes off and put on the new ones in a hurry in case I should see. I turned to watch her brush her straight thick hair.

One afternoon she was doing her hair like this when an accident happened, something which dominated her thoughts for months afterwards. She was holding her hand-mirror in one hand and talking to herself in it while she did her hair at the back.

"Is it right at the back? There's another bit. Let's put a pin in it. Here," she said, handing me a hairpin over her shoulder, "put it in, do you see? No, not there. That bit. Oh, come on, give it to me."

She had quick nervy hands, and she put out her hand for the pin and placed the mirror on the table.

"Here it is," I said. She was trying to get the pin from me without looking round and then she turned round with one of her sudden movements. Her elbow caught the mirror and it fell to the floor.

Aunt Gertrude's face changed.

"Don't touch it," she said.

I stood back, startled by the crash. She stared down at the mirror, which was lying on its face. Her manner frightened me.

"It's gone," she exclaimed. "I heard it go." Her face went very red and her cheeks became lumpy as she bent down and picked up the mirror. The glass had cracked across the face.

"Oh, I wish I hadn't done that," she said, gazing at the crack.

It was nothing for Aunt to smash things, tear things, drop things. She was a careless woman. And she did not mind except to say to the boys, "Don't tell your father." But as she held the mirror she looked with helpless appeal at it, blown out with unbelief.

"That's seven years' bad luck to me," she said.

"Don't be silly," I said.

"You see. I know it," she said. "I broke one before my wedding-day. And for seven years your uncle had nothing but trouble."

Then she stood up and got in a temper with me and everything, telling me to pick up her clothes and fold them straight and muttering such things as: "Where's your uncle? Brush your hair

before he comes. Three late nights this week! Look at my hair—it's coming down again."

And suddenly she pulled half her hair down, picked up the cracked mirror and started again angrily. Half her face was swollen and the other half looked fierce, distraught and mad, as she picked up lengths of hair and pulled them into place on top.

"Trouble the whole time. Never in the same job five minutes," she spat at the mirror. "That's your uncle. What's he doing now?"

She had hairpins in her teeth and pulled one out after every sentence.

"Pay as you go," she said. And out came a hairpin.

"That's how us girls were brought up. If you haven't got it, don't spend it." Another pin.

"It's robbery. They say I don't understand these things, but right's right." Another pin.

Aunt began to talk to invisible presences in the room.

"If your precious son's so perfect, why did I have to come up here with a babe in arms begging for bread and say 'Thank you' for every mouthful? 'Eh,' *she* says. 'There's some have no business to get married and may be some *has* to get married.' Vernon," she swung round to me, taking out the remaining pins and holding them wildly, "I could have skinned the old bitch. 'You mind what you're saying,' I said. 'A better-living lot of girls you won't find. Gran had her troubles as we all know, but us girls were straight.' "

The temper went and she sulked dreamily into the mirror.

"It's a good thing he met a straight girl like me," she said quietly. "A young country boy like that, he might have had someone who would have got hold of him. There was one or two in the shop. But I could stick up for myself. It was my hair," she said, lifting up the final strand and curling it round her finger, "he fell in love with, your poor mother could sit on hers."

"Vernon," she said, turning round again. "He had the cleanest hands I've ever seen on a man. I'll never forget in all my natural how clean his hands were. That was the first thing I noticed. Your dead dad used to say Horace Smith's the only man in this shop that washes."

"He got that from old Mrs Smith, of course. She scrubbed Horace and Mildred when they were kids till they were as clean as her kitchen. Too clean, if you ask me. But, of course, I didn't go out with him for the asking. I led him on. I didn't half make

him jealous. There he was in his spats—a regular k-nut, shop-walker, see—of course, he would have everything just so, your uncle!—and he says, ‘Buttons forward, Miss Carter,’ I can see him now. ‘Gloves here, not buttons, caught you bending,’ I said. The cheek of me when you come to think of it. I was terrible.” Aunt’s eyes flashed green as the sea.

“Girl-like,” she said dreamily. And then she saw the crack in the mirror and tears came into her eyes, large tears like the pearl buttons in her blouse. To me they were not like the tears I had seen before, for her common tears were hardly personal, but a general oblation to the unexplainable coming and going of woe in the world.

Main Road

AT THE close of a December evening when the roads are like slugs, oozy and gleaming in the cold, two workless and sodden men were shambling along, lost in the side lanes of silent country. The darkness had come down to the roots of the trees and the fields. The houses with their yellow dabs of oil light had scattered and thinned away. Blistered and squelching and gone past the cravings of hunger into a hunched, mechanical misery, the two men went on. It was their third day on the road, and, no longer exchanging any words, cursing the lanes which had snared them into homeless, foodless darkness, they seemed to be groping round and round in a pit. Now, they would almost sooner have found a main road than a plate of beef.

Suddenly the old one, who was ahead, stopped dead and then broke into a weak, gasping hobble.

"'Ere y'are," he called.

Without warning, after a sudden rise, the lane had finished. They were out of it. They stood—oh, miracle of miracles!—upon a main road. They gazed upon it with awe. Straight as a dull sword it carved the country in two, lightless, soundless, without signposts; and with it the double rows of telegraph poles and the low chopped hedges went. And now the two men were appalled. Which way? After the winding roads, this great one seemed to strike them like a plank flat in the face. It jerked the knees in their sockets. It was as hard as iron to the weak bones.

On this third day the object of their journey had been driven from their minds altogether. They did not care if they never got to the town where the factory and the jobs were said to be, nor where they slept. They had eaten poorly on the first two days when the adventure was young, but on this day the singing had stopped and the whistling. The only sounds all day had been the dazed singing in their heads, the gritting of their teeth.

During the daytime, not work nor towns but food had been their only thought. They ached and craved for it. Every step was for food, every glance sharpened the search for it, every sound was passed in judgment, every sight was questioned. The anarchy

of hunger was in their bubbling bellies which blew weakly out or cavernously sank.

Most of the time the younger one walked behind. Sometimes he had been only a few yards behind, sometimes the distance was twenty or thirty yards, once or twice it had been a quarter of a mile. He walked with belt tight and his hands in the sodden pockets of his overcoat, his straight shoulders rounded over his chest. He was a man of thirty with spikes of grey about the ears, his eyes were steely, the skin of his face stretched over the set bones. In his hunger he had begun to hate the man who was always in front.

He was a man near fifty, the older one, a man whose one-time florid corpulence had declined, like a leaking balloon, in two years of famine, to a bluish wobbling windiness. Dazed, vague, dreamy, his big arms lolling about loose and with a lost look in his eyes, he stumbled ahead. Even when their hunger had started to put out claws he had continued to make jokes. They were always the same kind of joke.

"Cows doin' nicely," was one of them.

"Show me a stew now an' I'd throw it back at you," was another.

First of all the younger man had begun hating him because he always got ahead. Then he hated his back and his figure and his ridiculous top-heavy way of walking on his toes. He hated him because, in the intolerable space and emptiness of the country and of the sky, it was necessary to hate someone. He hated him for being so bloody cocksure and humorous. He hated him for hearing of the job, thinking of the journey, for drinking their money on the second day, for leading this dance over the lanes when hunger had made them wander off the main road, so they were going round in circles, no doubt, like men lost in a forest—the forest of the cravings of hunger where everything reminds you of only one thing—looking for houses where there was food. But most of all he grew to hate the older man for begging. The young one had never begged, refused to beg, hung back if begging was on the cards. "The bloody old tramp!" he chewed away. "I'd sooner sock a man in the jaw than beg."

"And," he would add when the old man came away from a back door where he had been refused, "he doesn't get anything when he does beg." Throughout the day the young one had

looked at the baldish head of the older one as he bared it with an absurd touch of ceremony at kitchen doors, with intensified disgust. He hated him when he tried, he hated him when he failed, and, finally, even more he got to hate him when, discouraged and dazed, he passed houses without begging at all.

The older man was innocently unaware of all this. In the afternoon they had come among people who lived in scattered shacks and bungalows. There were small holdings and gardens of vegetables, with patches of glass frame, and everyone had a few chickens. They were small careful people, with a little nervous independence—small builders, small shopkeepers, small coal-merchants, small pensioners. They bent digging in their holdings and spoke arrogantly with fright when the big fellow went to a back door and asked for food. They had small, raging dogs. The two men walked closer together in these places. Lights were now lit, the yellow country lights, dabbed among the smeared blackness of the trees. The older man set the course. Instinctively he walked from light to light, stopping when he got to a lamp, wonderstruck because there was no food under it. Then on he went, lifting his feet high because of his blisters, the damp under his arms propping up his shoulders with spears of cold. Loosely his top teeth slid about on the lower ones; dazed and dreamy he walked. Tinned salmon, cabbage, suet pudding and cheese, he dreamed. Fish and chips, ham and eggs, spaghetti. Grass and rubbish heaps, dogs and cats. Thrushes, sparrows, chickens and canaries. In imagination he was grazing off everything he saw.

"We had a goat when I was a boy," he said. "And when it got a bit past it my ol' dad killed and skinned it." He jogged on ruminating. "Show me a bit of goat and I'd throw it back in your face."

The other one didn't answer. Their breath was short. In a weak voice the big one continued:

"Seagull. I knew a man who ate a seagull. The French eat horse."

"Goose is another tough thing. Wild goose. When we was boys . . ."

"It's a bleedin' pity you're not a boy now," called the younger man.

"What?" called back the old one over his shoulder, still walking.

And now the old fool was deaf. The young one strained himself to catch up. He gasped along with his mouth open. At last he got within a couple of yards of the old man.

"A bleedin' pity you're not a boy now," the young one shouted out in a rage. Having got it home, he dropped back yard by yard.

After this they had been silent. The old one wobbled along, deeply injured by the reproach; no more he laughed, no more he begged.

Then, suddenly, they had come upon the main road.

It was empty now. But when life came to this road it was not mean and made of little sounds, spade strokes and footsteps as it had been in the lanes. Here, when life came, it was brilliant and roaring. Every few minutes fans of light would open slowly in the elms a mile ahead and then abruptly narrow and close; a few seconds would pass and then the long beams of a car's headlights would leap out and paint the poles and hedges gaudily with light. Long shadows rushed back from the two men, and then new shorter shadows jumped out of them, until in a cascade of rushing brilliance the car roared by and they were left like men slapped in the face, awakened. Gliding more slowly towards them and sloping to the camber of the road came soft two-decker buses. Like meat in a shop-window the passengers seemed, women with full baskets, men with food inside them and pipes in their mouths. The two men stood upon the grass verge exalted by the light.

Now they were on the main road, the younger one took the lead. He lifted his head and stepped out. This was what he wanted. After the rasp of the wheels on this road its silences were icy and momentous. The cars whined and expired like shells across an empty planet wilderness. There was no sound of people. There were no animals moving in the fields. An appalling inhuman vacancy opened in the road. The younger one understood this. But before they had gone a mile the old man was craving for the sight of a lane in which, broken at last but sheltered, he could crawl and hide from these blinding lights that seemed to go clean through his mind, from these silences of iron. He was paralysed. At the sight of the first signpost he hurried after his companion and got there with him.

"Lane," he said breathlessly, lifting an arm. The hedges were high, a friendly warmth seemed to come from them. The young

one was startled into stopping. The last mile had been vehement. Lane must lead somewhere. House? Light?

The old one's eyes swung about helplessly, pleading. "Bloke," he said. He hadn't strength to say more.

The young one was compelled to listen. The sound of footsteps was distinctly heard. He, too, heard the footsteps distantly in the lane coming nearer. The two men listened, the only sounds were from their breathing and the steps. Suddenly, the old man stumbled off down the lane towards the steps. The young one gaped, but did not move. A figure dimly appeared in the darkness. It was a man. It was a youth. It was a youth with a small playful ball of light from a torch dancing round his feet.

"God!" exclaimed the young man, all the hatred of the day returning to his body, so that he clenched his fists. "The old fool's going to beg! God, I'll . . ." he raised his fists.

But in spite of this he found himself making a few steps after the old man. He saw the youth coming out of the black silence with a small raffia bag in his hand. He saw the old man move nearer the youth. He saw the youth stop. The younger one sidled up slowly, but still hanging aloof, as he always did when the old one begged. He stood scowling, with tears of craving in his eyes, and a cold shiver of rage and shame sprang through him when he heard the old man's voice.

"No. I haven't." Distinctly he heard the youth's answer. The young man's held breath went out and he unclenched his fists at the reply. He was beaten. He could have broken into tears; but when he saw the youth step aside making a half circle round the big fellow, afraid to lift the torch to his face, but half raising it instead to shine on his stomach and neck, a wild contempt, a rage before prey flung itself into his blood. Impelled by his day-long hatred of the old man he stepped forward, taking a cold breath. "I'll show you," he muttered. There was the smell of cows, the smell of chickens, the smell of a farm, where animals and birds had been feeding all day. "Leave the bastard alone," he rapped out loudly to the old man. He strode forward into the circle of light and stopped the youth.

"What's that?" he asked sharply, knocking the bag.

"Hyur" . . . blustered the young man, but his opened mouth would not make any more words. He flashed the light helplessly about him.

"Been pinching?" said the younger man.

The older man gaped, but said nothing.

"Chicken," stammered the youth. "Mrs Ross gave me a chicken."

"That's not a chicken," said the younger man.

The youth looked helplessly up and down the lane. He tried to skip away, but the older one woke up and stopped him.

"That's not a chicken." A sudden change had come over the older man. He copied the younger man's words. A feeling of intense new wakefulness was in both of them.

"Ah . . ." The youth tried to shout.

"Bleedin' thief," shouted the younger man. He trembled for a second and then suddenly let out a hard punch to the youth's wind and tripped him up. He went down flat in the mud.

Now there was no doubt about it. It was as if silently under all their talk and in all their silence they had been rehearsing this all day, working out every detail to perfection. They said nothing but sprang to it. The big fellow went down gay and hard on the gasping youth and sat on him. The younger one snatched up the bag and rummaged in the youth's coat pocket for a handkerchief. Money chinked. The youth feebly kicked. Without a word, the older man stuffed a bit of the handkerchief between the youth's teeth and tied it round his neck. A look of extraordinary pale, breathless gaiety rose in the older man's exhausted face; a look of keenness and shrewd skill sprang up in the eyes of the other. Their breath came in helpless gasps.

"'Ere y'are," they gasped together.

They lifted the youth up, giving a glance apiece up the lane.

"There's a bus coming," said the older one. They pitched the youth at the top of their strength through the hedge and into the ditch and ran for the bus.

Out of the lane and across the road they went. They were babbling, choking, half laughing. They waved their arms to signal to the large green bus softly swerving towards them.

They grabbed frantically at the rail.

"Just in time," grinned the older man to the conductor.

The conductor, noting the numbers of tickets, hardly smiled.

The big one flopped into a seat on one side of the gangway. He had the bag on his knee. The younger one sat on the opposite side. They sat panting quietly. The passengers stared at them

stupidly. The dry warmth of the bus entered into the bodies of the two men and the pounding of their hearts slackened. Their heads lolled weakly, luxuriously on their necks.

"Two to the finish," said the older man in a hoarse voice.

The younger one paid up. What was more, there was a shilling change. The older man glanced at the empty road behind and then settled comfortably down. With its warm soft roar the bus broke the dull air of the open country. What a change! He winked at the younger one.

"Got a fag?" he teased.

The shadow of the grin he had had when he was a much fatter and less crafty man came on his face. It made the passengers smile. Reassured, the older man felt the bag with his fingers. Cautiously he drew out the skewer and looked down. He signalled across the gangway like a schoolboy.

"Nt. Chkn. Fsnt," he was signalling with his lips. Not chicken, pheasant.

This made the passengers laugh. The grin on the older man's face became broader and deeper, feeding on his face. He loved the world. The light vans of tradesmen began to spin by, passing the speeding bus. There was light, speed, hilarity everywhere. A feeling of wild irresponsibility overcame the older man. Amid the laughter of the passengers, he pulled the pheasant's tail out of the bag.

But the younger one ignored all this. Crouching in his seat, he sat alert in the bitter vividness of his vengeance and his pride. There goes the bloody butcher, the bloody baker, money streaming down the world in petrol. Food! He looked at the old man with contempt. What he wanted, his tortured hating soul cried out within him, was not food.

Handsome Is As Handsome Does

IN the morning the Corams used to leave the Pension, which was like a white box with a terra-cotta lid among its vines on the hill above the town, and walk through the dust and lavish shade to the beach. They were a couple in their forties.

He had never been out of England before, but she had spent half her youth in foreign countries. She used to wear shabby saffron beach-pyjamas with a navy-blue top which the sun had faded. She was a short, thin woman, ugly yet attractive. Her hair was going grey, her face was clay-coloured, her nose was big and long and she had long yellowish eyes. In this beach-suit she looked rat-like, with that peculiar busyness, inquisitiveness, intelligence and even charm of rats. People always came and spoke to her and were amused by her conversation. They were startled by her ugly face and her shabbiness, but they liked her lazy voice, her quick mind, her graceful good manners, the look of experience and good sense in her eyes.

He was a year older. On the hottest days, when she lay bare-backed and drunk with sunlight, dozing or reading a book, he sat awkwardly beside her in a thick tweed jacket and a white hat pulled down over his eyes. He was a thickset, ugly man; they were an ugly pair. Surly, blunt-speaking, big-boned, with stiff short fair hair that seemed to be struggling and alight in the sun, he sat frowning and glaring almost wistfully and tediously from his round blue eyes. He had big hands like a labourer's. When people came to speak to her, he first of all edged away. His instinct was to avoid all people. He wanted to sit there silently with her, alone. But if the people persisted, then he was rude to them, rude, uncouth and quarrelsome. Then she had to smooth away his rudeness and distract attention from it. But he would ignore the person to whom she was talking and looking down at her would say, "What are you getting at me for, Julia?" There was a note of angry self-pity in his voice. She liked a man of spirit.

This started quarrels. They were always quarrelling. They quarrelled about their car, their food, where they would sit, whether on the beach or at cafés, whether they would read

upstairs or downstairs. He did not really know he was quarrelling. The trouble was that everything seemed difficult to him. He had thoughts, but he could not get them out. They were tied up in knots like snakes, squeezing and suffocating him. Whenever he made a suggestion or offered an opinion, his short brow became contorted with thick frowns, like a bull's forehead, and he coloured. He lowered his forehead, not as if he were going to charge with fury, but as if he were faced with the job of pushing some impossible rock uphill. He was helpless.

She would see this and, cunningly, tactfully, she would make things easy for him. They had no children and, because of the guilt she felt about this and because of the difficulties he saw everywhere, they had become completely dependent on each other.

First of all they were alone at the Pension. There were themselves and Monsieur Pierre. He was the proprietor. At meal-times they all sat together. Monsieur Pierre was a plump grey man of sixty, with a pathetic, mean little mouth, a monocle in his eye. He was a short and vain little dandy and was given to boastfulness. The town was a gay place in the summer, like a pink flower opening by the peacock sea, and Monsieur Pierre was the butterfly that flutters about it. He had the hips of a woman. He was full of learned little proverbs, and precise little habits. Certain hours he would devote to lying on a couch and reading detective stories in a darkened room. At another time he would sit in his dining-room with a patent cigarette-making machine, winding the handle, meddling with the mechanism, turning out the cigarettes. He gave a lick to each one as it came out. "So he won't have to offer you one," Coram said.

In the afternoon Monsieur Pierre made a great fuss. Appearing in yellow vest and red trousers, he took out a new bicycle done in grey enamel and glittering with plated bars, gears, brakes, acetylene lamps and elaborate looped wires. He mounted by a tree and, talking excitedly as if he were about to depart on some dangerous journey to the Alps or the Himalaya, he would whizz giddily down to the beach with his towel and striped gown on the carrier.

"You are going to bathe this afternoon?" Monsieur Pierre asked. "I am going." It was a question he put to the Englishman regularly at lunch-time. Monsieur Pierre would boast of his love of the sea.

Coram frowned and coloured, and a veil of wetness, as if tears were being generated by the struggle within, came to his eyes.

"What's he say?" he asked his wife at last, for he understood French poorly.

"He wants to know whether we are going to bathe with him."

"Him!" said Coram in a surly voice. "Him bathe! He can't swim. He can't swim a yard. He just goes down to look at the women."

"Please, Tom!" she said in a sharp lowered voice. "You mustn't say that in front of him. He understands more than you think."

Monsieur Pierre sat at the head of the table, grey hair parted in the middle, monocle on expressionless face.

"He's a fraud," Coram said in his blunt grumbling voice. "If he understands English, why does he pretend he don't?"

"Parlez français, Monsieur Coram," came the neat, spinsterly correcting voice of the Frenchman.

"Oui," said the wife very quickly, smiling the long enchanting smile which transformed her ugly face. "*Il faut.*"

Monsieur Pierre smiled at her and she smiled at him. He liked her bad accent. And she liked him very much, but for her husband's sake she had to pretend to dislike him. Her life was full of pretences, small lies and exaggerations which she contrived for her husband's sake.

But Coram disliked the Frenchman from the beginning. When Monsieur Pierre saw the Corams had a car, he persuaded them to take him about the country; he would show them its beauties. Sitting like a little duke in the car, he pointed out the torrid towns raked together like heaps of earthenware in the mountain valleys, the pale stairways of olives going up hills where no grass grew and the valleys filled with vines. Driving in the fixed, unchanging sunlight, Monsieur Pierre directed them to sudden sights of the sea in new bays more extravagant in colour. Coram frowned. It was all right for his wife. She had been to such places before. Her family had always been to such places. This was the thing which always awed him when he thought about her; pleasure had been natural to her family for generations. But for him it was unnatural. All this was too beautiful. He had never seen anything like it. He could not speak. At noon when the mountains of the coast seemed to lie head down to the sea like savage, panting and silver animals, or in the evening when the flanks and summits were cut by sharp

purple shadows and the sea became like some murmuring lake of milky opal, he felt the place had made a wound in him. He felt in his heart the suspended anger of a man torn between happiness and pain. After his life in the villas and chemical factories of the Midlands, where the air was like an escape of gas and the country brick-bruised and infected, he could not believe in this beautiful country. Incredulous, he mistrusted.

"Garson!" (There was a café near the harbour where the Corams used to sit for an hour before dinner.) "Garson—Encore—drinks!" That was the only way he could melt his mistrust.

Coram could not explain why. He was thwarted like his country. All he could do was frown and take it out of Monsieur Pierre.

"He's a mean squirt," Coram said.

"He's a liar," he said.

"Look at him making those cigarettes."

"We've known him a week, and what's he do but cadge drinks and rides in the car. He's a fraud."

His wife listened. Her husband was a man without subtlety or wit, quite defenceless before unusual experience. He was a child. Every day she was soothing this smouldering aching struggle that was going on inside him.

After they had been there a week a newcomer arrived at the Pension. He arrived one morning by the early train, walking down from the station with his new light suitcase. He was a young man in his twenties, tall, dark, aquiline, a Jew.

"We will call you Monsieur Alex," said Monsieur Pierre with his French love of arranging things.

"That is charming," said the Jew.

He spoke excellent English, a little too perfect, a little too round in the vowels, and excellent French, almost too pure. He talked easily. He had heard, he said, that there were some excellent pictures in the churches of the mountain towns.

"Rather sweet isn't he?" said Mrs Coram. The Jew was grave and handsome. Coram was admiring too, but he was more cautious.

"Yeah. He looks all right," he said.

His mother was French, the young Jew told them on the first evening, his father German. But they had both come from Austria originally. He had cousins in every country in Europe. He had been educated in England. Slender, with long hands, a

little coarse in complexion in the Jewish way, he had grey and acute sepia eyes. He was so boyish, so free in his talk about himself, so shy and eager in his laugh—and yet—how could Mrs Coram describe it?—he seemed ancient, like some fine statue centuries old that has worn and ripened in the sun. He was thick-lipped and had a slight lisping hesitance of speech, and this sense of the ancient and profound came perhaps from his habit of pausing before he spoke as if judiciously cogitating. Mrs Coram would sit there expectant and curious. She was used to the hesitations, the struggles with thought of her husband; but there was this difference: when the Jew spoke at last, what he said was serious, considered, a charming decoration of commentary upon their discussions.

Monsieur Pierre always longed for fresh worlds to patronize; he was delighted with Alex. Too delighted for Coram and even for his wife. She could not help being on the point of jealousy when Alex sat and talked to the Frenchman. Coram bluntly wanted to rescue the young man from "the fraud".

"You know what's wrong . . . with this place," Coram said to Alex. "There's no industry."

"Oh, but surely agriculture, the wine," said Alex.

"Yeah, I know," said Coram. "I mean real industry. . . ."

"My husband's a chemist, industrial chemist," she explained.

"I mean," said Coram, grinding on and frowning quizzically, "they just sit around and grow wine and batten on the visitors, like this feller. What a town like this wants is a couple of good whore-shops and a factory. . . ."

"Tom!" said Mrs Coram. "How exotic you've become."

"I expect ample provision has been made," said the Jew.

"No," said Coram, in his halting, muddling, bullying tone, "but you see what I mean."

He screwed up his eyes. He wished to convey that he had not quite found the words for what he had meant really to say.

The odd thing about the young Jew was that although he seemed to be rich and was cultivated, he had no friends in the town. The young always arrived in troops and car-loads at this place. The elderly were often in ones and twos, but the young—never. Mrs Coram detected a curious loneliness in him. Polite and formal, he sometimes seemed not to be there. Why had he come? Why to this Pension? It was a cheap place, and he obviously had

money. Why alone? There were no relations, no women. When he went out he saw no one, spoke to no one. Why not? Alone he visited the mountain churches. He was equable, smiling, interested, happy—yet alone. He liked to be alone, it seemed, and yet when they spoke to him, when Coram—urged by her—asked him to come down to the beach or drive in the car, he came without hesitation, with the continuous effortless good manners and curious lack of intimacy that he always had. It baffled her. She wanted to protect and mother him.

"The Jewboy," Coram called him. His wife hated this. They quarrelled.

"Stop using that stupid expression," she said.

"He is," said her husband. "I've nothing against him. He's clever. But he's a Jewboy. That's all." He was not against the Jewboy. He even liked him. They talked together. Coram almost felt protective to him too.

"Aren't you being rather vulgar?" she said to her husband.

One effect the Jew had on them was to make them stop having this kind of quarrel in public. Coram did not change. He was as uncouth as ever. But his wife restrained herself. In mortification she heard his crude stumbling words and quickly interrupted them, smoothed them away hastily so that Alex should not notice them. Either she was brushing her husband away out of hearing, first of all, or she was working with every nerve to transform her husband in the young man's eyes. At the end of the day she was exhausted.

One evening when they went up to bed in the hot room at the top of the house, she said to her husband:

"How old is he, Tom? Twenty-two?"

Coram stared at her. He did not know.

"Do you realize," she said, "we're nearly old enough to be his parents?" She had no children. She thought about him as her son.

She took off her clothes. The room was hot. She lay on the bed. Coram, slow and methodical, was taking off his shoes. He went to the window and emptied out the sand. He did not answer. He was working out how old he would have been if the young man had been his son. Before he found an answer, she spoke again.

"One forgets he must think we're old," she said. "Do you think he does? Do you think he realizes how much older we are?"

When I look at him it seems a century and then other times we might all be the same age. . . ."

"Jews look older than they are," said Coram.

Her questioning voice stopped. Tom was hanging up his jacket. Every time he took off a garment he walked heavily across the room. Her questions went on silently in her mind. Twenty-two? And she was forty. What did he think of her? What did he think of her husband? Did her husband seem crude and vulgar? Did he seem slow-minded? What did the young man think of both of them? Did he notice things? Did he notice their quarrels? And why did he like to spend time with them, talk to them, go about with them? What was he thinking, what was he feeling? Why was he so friendly and yet ultimately so unapproachable?

She lay on her side with her slight knees bent. Out of her shabby clothes her body was thin but graceful. Her shoulders were slender, but there were lines on her neck, a reddish stain spreading over her breast-bone, a stain hard with exposure to years. Her small breasts were loose and slack over the ribs. The skin creasing under them was sallow. She ran her hands over her hips. She moved her hands round and round on her small flat belly, caressing herself where she knew her body was beautiful. It seemed only a few days ago that this had been the body of a young girl. She was filled with sadness for her husband and herself. She could hear the beating of her heart. She found herself listening for the steps of the young man on the stairs. Her heart beat louder. To silence it she said in an anxious voice to her husband, lowering her knees:

"Tom—you haven't stopped wanting me." She knew her voice was false.

He was taking off his shirt.

"What do you want?" he said.

His face looked grotesque as it looked out of the shirt top.

"Nothing," she said.

Tom took off his shirt and looked out of the window. You could see the white farms of the valley with their heavy walls from the window. The peasants kept their dogs chained, and when there was a moon they barked, a dozen or more of them, one after the other, all down the valley.

"If those dogs—start to-night—we won't sleep," he said. He came to the bed and waited for her to get under the sheet. She

felt his big-boned body beside her and smelled his sharp, curious smell.

"God," he said. He felt stupefied in this place. In five minutes he was asleep. But she lay awake. Forty, she was thinking. A woman of forty with a son. No son. She heard, as she lay awake, the deep breathing of her husband, the curious whistlings of his breath. She lay thinking about her life, puzzling, wondering. Why had she no son? She dozed. She awakened. She threw back the sheet and sleeplessly sighed. If she slept it was only in snatches, and she woke up with her heart beating violently and to find herself listening for the sound of a step on the stairs. There was a sensation of inordinate hunger and breathlessness in her body.

Sometimes the young Jew waited for them in the morning and went down with them to the beach. He carried her basket for her or her book. He went back for things.

"Tom," she said in front of her husband, "has no manners."

She walked between them and talked excitedly to the young man about characters in books, or foreign towns, or pictures. She laughed and Coram smiled. He listened with wonder to them.

They sat on the beach. Under his clothes the Jew wore a black bathing-suit. He undressed at once and went into the water. His body was alien and slender, the skin burned to the colour of dark corn. He dived in and swam far out into the blue water, beyond the other bathers. He did not laugh or wave or call back, but in his distant, impersonal way he swam far out with long easy strokes. After a mile he lay floating in the sun. He seemed to pass the whole morning out there. She could see his black head. To be young like that and lie in the sea in the sun! And yet how boring to lie there for so long. She would have sudden pangs of anxiety. She would talk of the cold current that came out in the deeper water, from the harbour. She was always glad and relieved when she saw his head moving towards the shore. When he came out of the water he seemed to be dry at once, as if some oil were in his skin. She would see only beads of water at the back of his neck on the short black hair.

"You can swim!" she said.

He smiled.

"Not much," he said. "Why don't you?"

The question pleased her. She was astonished by the pleasure it gave her.

"I'm not allowed," she said with animation. "Tell me, what were you doing out there? You were such a long time."

His dark eyes were large and candid as he turned to her and she caught her breath. There were three or four black freckles on his skin. Her older yellow eyes returned his innocent gaze. Good heavens, she thought. With eyes like that he ought to be a girl. But she did not know and did not feel that her eyes were older than his.

"I was nearly asleep," he said. "The sea is like a mattress."

He and Coram had a scientific discussion about the possibility of sleeping on the sea.

It was absurd of her, she knew, but she was disappointed. Had he not thought of them, of her? She had been thinking of him all the time.

Coram sat beside them. He talked about the business scandals and frauds in the chemical trade. The quick-minded Jew understood all these stories long before Coram got to their elaborate end. Coram had an obsession with fraud. His slow mind was angry about that kind of quickness of mind which made fraud possible. Coram sat inert, uncomprehending, quite outside the gaiety on the beach. He was not gloomy or morose. He was not sulking. His blue eyes glistened and he had the wistful face of a dog trying to understand. He sat struggling to find words which would convey all that he had felt in this fortnight. He considered the sea and the young man for a long time. Then he undressed. Out of his dark red bathing-dress his legs were white and were covered with thick golden hairs. His neck was pink where the sun had caught it. He walked down awkwardly over the pebbles, scowling because of the force of the sun, and straddled knee-deep into the water. Then he flung himself on it helplessly, almost angrily, and began clawing at it. He seemed to swim with clenched fists. They could see him clawing and crawling as the slow blue swell lifted him up. For a hundred yards he would swim not in a straight line but making a half circle from the beach, as if he were incapable of swimming straight or of knowing where he was going. When he waded out with the water drenching from him there was a look of grievance on his face.

"That water's dirty," he said when he got back. The Mediterranean was a fraud: it was too warm, thick as syrup. He sat dripping on his wife's books.

One morning when he came back and was drying himself, rubbing his head with the towel, he caught sight of Monsieur Pierre. The Frenchman was sitting not many yards away. Short-sighted, no doubt Monsieur Pierre had not seen them. Beside him were his towels, his red slippers, his red swimming-helmet, his cigarette-case, his striped bathing-gown and his jar of cocoanut oil. He was in his bathing-dress. More than ever, but for his short grey hair, he looked like a pot-bellied middle-aged woman as he rubbed cocoanut oil on his short brown arms. His monocle was in his eye. He looked like a Lesbian in his monocle.

Coram scowled.

"You see," he blurted in a loud voice. "He hasn't been in. He won't go in either. He just comes—down here—all dolled up—to look at the women."

"Not so loud," his wife said. "Please." She looked with anxiety at the Jew. "Poor Monsieur Pierre," said Mrs Coram. "Remember his age. He's sixty. Perhaps he doesn't want to go in. I bet you won't be swimming when you're sixty."

"He can swim very well," said the young Jew politely. "I went out with him a couple of days ago from the other beach." He pointed over the small headland. "He swam out to the ship in the bay. That is three miles."

"There, Tom!" cried his wife.

She was getting bored with these attacks on Monsieur Pierre.

"He's a fraud, a rotten fraud," said Tom in his smouldering, struggling voice.

"But Alex was with him!" she said.

"I don't care who was with him," said Tom. "He's a fraud. You wait till you know him better," said Tom bluntly to the Jew. "Believe me, he's a rotten little blackmailer."

"Ssh. You don't know that. You mustn't repeat things," she said.

"Well, you know it as well as I do," Tom said.

"Quiet, Tom, please," his wife said. "He's sitting there."

"He blackmails his brother-in-law," Tom persisted. He was addressing himself to the Jew.

"Well, what of it?"

She was angry. Monsieur Pierre could easily hear. And she was

angry, trembling with anger, because she did not want the young man to see the uncouthness of her husband and her mortification at it.

"Pierre's sister married a motor millionaire. That's where Pierre gets his money. He waits till his brother-in-law has a new woman and then goes to his sister and pitches the tale to her. She goes to her husband, makes a jealous scene and, to keep her quiet, he gives her what she wants for Pierre."

"You don't know that," she said.

"I know it as well as you do," he said. "Everyone in the town knows it. He's a fraud."

"Well, don't *shout*. And use some other word. It's a bore," she said.

"I've no respect for a man who doesn't earn his living," Coram said. Oh, God, she thought, now he's going to quarrel with this boy.

The Jew raised an eyebrow.

"Doesn't he keep the Pension?" the Jew enquired calmly.

"You mean his servants keep it," blustered Coram. "Have you ever seen him do a stroke?"

"Well," his wife said, "we can't all be like you, Tom. My family never earned a penny in their lives. They would have been horrified at the idea."

She was speaking not with irony but with indignation. At once she knew she had gone too far. She had failed for once to soothe, to smooth away.

"Ay! Didn't want the dirty work," Coram said, dropping into his Midland accent. He was not angry. He was, from his own stolid point of view, reasonable and even genial. He wondered why she was "getting at" him.

"Why, dearest," she said, knowing how irony hurt his vanity. "You've hit it. You've hit it in one. Bravo. They had no illusions about the nobility of work." She was ridiculing him.

"You don't believe in the nobility of work, do you?" she said to the Jew. "My husband's got a slave's mind," she said.

"Working is a habit, like sleeping and eating," said the Jew seriously in his lazy and too perfect enunciation. It had the well-oiled precision of a complexity of small pistons in an impersonal machine. She had heard him speak French and German with an equal excellence. It was predestined.

Living with her husband, always dealing with the inarticulate,

she had injured her own full capacity to speak. The Jew stirred her tongue and her lips. She felt an impulse to put her lips to his, not in love, but to draw some of the magic of exposition from him. She wanted her head to be joined to his head in a kiss, her brow to be against his. And then his young face and his dark hair would take the lines from her face and would darken her greyness with the dark, fresh, gleaming stain of youth. She could never really believe that her hair was grey. Her lips were tingling and parted as, lost in this imagination, she gazed at him; innocent and cool-eyed, he returned her look. She did not lower her eyes. How young she had been! A shudder of weakness took her shoulders and pain spread like a burn from her throat and over her breasts into the pit of her stomach. She moistened her lips. She saw herself driving in the August sun on an English road twenty years ago, a blue tarred road that ran dazzling like steel into dense trees and then turned and vanished. That day with its climate and the resinous smells of the country always came back when she thought of being young. She was overwhelmed.

The sun had gone in and the sea was grey and sultry and, in this light, the water looked heavier and momentous, higher and deeper at the shore, like a swollen wall. The sight of the small lips of foam was like the sight of thirst, like the sudden inexplicable thirst she had for his lips.

Then she heard Tom's voice. It was explanatory. Sitting with people who were talking, he would sometimes slowly come to conclusions about a remark which had struck him earlier in the conversation. He would cling to this, work upon it, struggle with it. She often laughed affectionately at this lagging of his tortoise mind.

The frowns were deep in the thick pink skin of his forehead, the almost tearful glare was in his eyes:

"They didn't want the dirty work," he said. He was addressing the young man. "They have butlers. They have a grown man to answer door-bells and bring letters. Her family had. They corrupt people by making them slaves. . . ."

The Jew listened politely. Coram felt he hadn't said what he meant. The frown deepened as the clear eyes of the Jew looked at his troubled face.

"I was on a jury," Coram said. "We had to try a man . . ."

"Oh, Tom, not that story about the butler who stole eleven-

pence. Yes, Tom was on a jury and a man got six months for obtaining a meal value elevenpence from an A.B.C. or a Lyons or some place. . . .”

“Yes,” said Coram eagerly, his glaring eyes begging the Jew to see his point.

He wanted to explain that a man corrupts by employing servants. No, not that. What Coram really meant in his heart was that he would not forgive his wife for coming from a rich family. And yet something more than that, too, something not so ridiculous but more painful. He was thinking of some fatal difference between his wife and himself and their fatal difference from society. He was thinking of the wound which this place by the beautiful sea had made in him. He struggled, gave it up.

But she looked scornfully at him. She wiped him out of her sight. She was angry with him for exposing his stupidity before the young Jew. She had fought against it in the last few days; she had been most clever in concealing it. But now she had failed. The thing was public.

She got up angrily from the beach.

“Pick up my book,” she said to her husband. The Jew did not quite hide his astonishment. She saw him gaze, and was angrier still with herself. Tactfully he let her husband pick up the book.

They walked back to the Pension. All the way along the road she scarcely spoke to her husband. Once in their room, she pulled off her hat and went to the mirror. She saw him reflected in the glass, standing with a look of heavy resentment on his face, bewildered by her.

She saw her own face. The skin was swollen with anger and lined too. Her grey hair was untidy. She was shocked by her physical deterioration. She was ugly. When she heard the young man’s step on the stairs she could have wept. She waited: he did not close his door. This was more than she could bear. She turned upon her husband. She raised her voice. She wanted the young man to hear her rage.

Why had she married such an oaf, such a boor? Her family had begged her not to marry him. She mocked him. He failed at everything. There he was, stuck at forty, stuck in his career, stuck for life.

Sometimes he blurted out things in the quarrel, but most of the time he was speechless. He stood at the foot of the bed with his

tweed coat in his hand, looking at her with heavy blue eyes, his face reddening under the insults, his tongue struggling to answer, his throat moving. He was not cold, but hot with goading. Yet he did nothing. The forces inside him were locked like wrestlers at each other's throats, muddled, powerless. As the quarrel exhausted itself, she sank on to the bed. She was fascinated by his hulking incapacity. She had always been fascinated. From the very beginning.

He had not moved during all this, but when she lay down on the bed with her head in the pillow he went quietly to the clothes peg and hung up his coat. He stood there rolling up his sleeves. He was going to wash. But she heard him move. She suddenly could not bear that he moved away, even those two steps, from her. She could not bear that he should say to himself, "One of Julia's scenes. Leave her alone. She'll get over it," and, taking his opportunity, slip away and go on as if nothing had happened.

She sat up on the edge of the bed. Tears were stinging her cheeks.

"Tom!" she called out. "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

He turned guiltily. She had made him turn.

"I want a child, Tom. What are we going to do? I must have a child."

Her tone made his blood run cold. There was something wild and horror-struck in her voice. It sounded like a piercing voice crying out in a cavern far away from any other living creature, outraged, animal and incomprehensible.

God, he thought. Are we going over all that again? I thought we'd resigned ourselves to that.

He wanted to say, "You're forty. You can't have a child." But he could not say that to her. He suspected that she was acting. He said instead what she so often said to him; it seemed to be the burden of their isolated lives.

"Quiet," he said. "People will hear."

"All you ever think of!" she cried out. "People. Drift. Do nothing."

They went down the tiled stairs to the dining-room. The sun had come out again, but it was weak. A thin film of cloud was rising in the east. The shutters of the dining-room were always

closed early in the morning, and by noon the house was cool and dark. Before his guests came down, Monsieur Pierre used to go round the room with a fly-swatter. Then the wine was brought in a bucket of water and he put it down beside his chair and waited. A clock clucked like some drowsy hen on the wall, and the coloured plates, like crude carnival wheels, glowed in the darkened room on the black carved shelves of the cupboard. Mrs Coram came into the room and she heard the dust blowing outside in the breeze and the leaves moving in the vines. A bolt tapped on the shutters.

Their faces were dark in the room, all the faces except Mrs Coram's. Her face was white and heavily powdered. She had been afraid that when she saw Alex she would be unable to speak, but would choke and have to run from the table. To her surprise, when she saw him standing by his chair in the room, with his brown bare arm on the chair top, she was able to speak. So easily that she talked a great deal.

"Red wine or white? The wishes of women are the wishes of God," said Monsieur Pierre to her, paying himself a compliment at the same time.

She began to mock the young man. He laughed. He enjoyed the mockery. "The wishes of women are the sorrows of Satan," he said satanically. She went on to mockery of Monsieur Pierre. He was delighted. She repeated in her own way the things which her husband said about him.

"Monsieur Pierre is a fraud," she said. "He goes to the beach. He pretends he goes there to swim. Don't you believe it! He goes there to look at the girls. And Alex—he has got a motor inside him. He goes straight out and anchors. You think he's swimming. But he's only floating."

"I can swim ten miles," said Monsieur Pierre. He took a small mouthful of wine and boasted in a neat, deprecating way. "I once swam half across the Channel."

"Did you?" said the young man with genuine interest.

And once Monsieur Pierre had started to boast, he could not be stopped. She egged him on.

"Challenge him," said Coram morosely to the young man, chewing a piece of meat.

"I challenge him," said Monsieur Pierre.

But not at the town beach, he said, at the one beyond. It was

true he rarely swam at the town beach. He liked to be alone when he swam . . . solitude . . . freedom. . . .

"You bet he does," grunted Coram.

"And Monsieur Coram too," said Monsieur Pierre.

"I have been in once," Coram said.

"So have they!" she exclaimed.

When they got up from the table, Coram took his wife aside. He saw through it all, he said to her; it was a device of Monsieur Pierre's to get a drive in his car. She was astonished at this remark. Before to-day she would not have been astonished, she would have tried to smooth away the difficulties he saw and the suspicions. But now everything was changed. He was like a stranger to her. She saw it clearly; he was mean. Men of his class who had worked their way up from nothing were often mean. Such a rise in the world was admired. She had once admired it. Now it amused her and made her contemptuous. Mean! Why had she never thought of that before? She had been blind.

When lunch was over, it was their habit in the house to go to their rooms and sleep. She waited. First Monsieur Pierre went into his room, with his yellow novel. The Jew and her husband lingered. "The best thing about this place is the drinks," he was saying. "They're cheap. You can have as much as you like. Down at those hotels in the town they don't leave the bottle on the table." He was flushed and torpid. After a while he said:

"I'm going up."

"I'm staying here. I shall take a deck-chair outside. That room's too hot," she said.

He hesitated. "Go, go," she almost cried. She looked at the black shining hair of the young man, his full lips, the brown bare arms that came out of the blue vest, the large dark hands, redder with the flush of blood. They were spread on the table, stroking the cloth. She could feel, in imagination, those palms on her body. Her heart raced and shook her. She and he would be alone. She would talk to him, she would not listen to him, he should not have his own words, perfect, predestined and impersonal. It was she who would talk. She would make him halt and stammer. She would break through this perfection of impersonal speech. She would talk and make him know her. She would bring herself close to him with words, and then with touch. She would touch him. He was young, he was without will: he would touch

her. She saw in her mind the open door of his room. She thought all this as her husband hesitated, stupefied, by the table.

But when he went and she was alone with Alex her heart stopped and there were no words in her throat. Her whole body was trembling, the bones of her knees were hard to her hands.

"I think," Alex suddenly said as he had often said before, "I think I shall go for a walk. I'll be back for the swim," he said.

She gasped. She looked with intent irony at him. She saw him get up from the table and, in his oddly studied way, as if there were meat in his solitude no one else could know, he went.

"You fool," she said to herself. But as she stared out of the open door and heard his cool footsteps on the gravel outside until the sound of the breeze in the vines licked them away, she felt lost with relief.

In a deck-chair under the mulberry tree she thought about herself and her husband. It was the time of year when the fruit of the mulberry falls. The berries dropped on to the gravel, into the tank where the frogs croaked at night and on to the table. They broke there. Sometimes they dropped like small hard hearts into her lap and when she picked them off they crushed in her fingers and the red juice ran out. She breathed deeply, almost panting in her chair.

She had married an outcast. Her relations had said that and they had been right. Some of those who had been right—her mother and father, for example—were dead. Tom's father had had a small boot-repairing business in Leicester. He worked in the front room of their house, with its bay window. *Coram. Repairs While You Wait.* That man and his wife had had seven children. Imagine such a life! Tom had studied, won scholarships, passed examinations. All his life he had been different from his brothers and sisters. Now his job was chemistry. Once he was going to be a famous chemist. Instead he got commercial jobs in the laboratories of big firms. He did not belong to the working class any more. He did not belong to her class. He did not belong to the class of the comfortable professional people he now met. He did not belong anywhere. He was lost, rough, unfinished, ugly, unshaped by the wise and harmonious hand of a good environment.

And she had really been the same. That was what had brought them together. He was ugly in life, she was ugly in body; two ugly people cut off from all others, living in their desert island.

Her family were country gentry, not very rich, with small private incomes and testy, tiresome genteel habits. The males went into the army. The females married into the army. You saw one and you had seen them all. She had always been small and thin; her long nose, her long mouth, her almost yellowish eyes and dead clay skin made her ugly. She had to be clever and lively, had to have a will or no one would have noticed her. At one time she supposed she would marry one of those tedious young men with dead eyes and little fair moustaches who were "keen" on gunnery and motor cars. She had thrown herself at them—thrown herself at them, indeed, like a bomb. That didn't suit the modern militarists. They had the tastes of clerks. They fingered their moustaches, looked dead and embarrassed at her, said they couldn't bear "highbrow" girls, and got away as quickly as they could. They were shocked because she didn't wear gloves. The naked finger seemed an indecency to them. "I could be a General's wife by now if I'd worn gloves," she used to say. Before they could throw her out and treat her as the bright, noisy, impossible woman who appears in every family, she threw them out.

So she married Tom. She got away from her home, went to live with a friend, met Tom and married him. There was a row. "The toothpaste man," her relations called him. Thought she was going to live in a chemist's shop. He became a stick to beat her family with; he was going to be a great man, a great scientist—she flogged them. He was going to be a much greater man than those "keen" subalterns with their flannel bags, dance records and little moustaches, or those furtive majors, guilty with self-love.

She looked back on these days. She had always expected something dramatic and sudden to happen. But—what was it?—Tom had not become a great man. The emergence from his class had become really an obsession, and a habit. He was struggling to emerge long after he had emerged. He was always spending his energy on reacting from something which no longer existed. He lived—she could never quite understand it—in the grip of some thwarting inward conflict, his energy went into this invisible struggle. The veins and the muscles swelled as if they would burst.

Torn between dealing with her, that is with the simple business of giving her simple natural happiness, and himself, he was paralysed. And they had had no children. Whose fault was that? At first it was a mercy because they were poor, but later? She slept with him. Her body had grown old trying to tear a child from him. Afterwards she attacked him. He listened, stupefied.

Why had this happened to her? And why had she this guilt towards him so that now she pitied him and spent all her day coming between him and difficulty? She had sown her disappointment in him, he had sown his frustration in her. Why? And why did they live in a circle they could not break? Why did they live so long in it until suddenly she was forty, a grey-haired woman?

She went over these things, but she was not thinking and feeling them only. There was the soft stroke of a pulse between her breasts, making her breathless with every throb. Movement came to her blood from the sight of the blowing vines and the red soil of the olive fields and out of the wind-whitened sky. Her lips parted in thirst for the articulate lips of the young Jew. She could not sleep or read.

At last she went into the cool house. The flies, driven indoors by the wind, were swimming in the darkness. She went up the stairs to her room.

"Get up," she said to her husband. "We must go."

He couldn't go in these clothes, she said. He must get the car. She bullied him. She changed into a green dress. Grumbling, he changed.

She looked out of the window. Alex was not coming. She could see the valley and the trees flowing and silvered by the wind. Dust was blowing along the roads between the earth and sun giving it a weird and brilliant light like the glitter of silica in granite.

Tom went downstairs. His clothes were thrown all over the room.

"We're waiting," he said when she came down. The black car was there and Monsieur Pierre. He stood by it as if he owned it.

"Women," said Monsieur Pierre, "are like the bon Dieu. They live not in time but in eternity."

Coram glared at him. Alex was there, tall and impersonal. He had come back, he said, some other way. He gravely con-

sidered Monsieur Pierre's remark. He made a quotation from a poet. This was obscure to her and everyone.

"Where the hell's this picnic going to be?" said Coram.

They disputed about where they should sit. That is, she said one thing and her husband another. At last Monsieur Pierre was in front and she and the young man were at the back. Coram got in and sulked. No one had answered his question. "If anyone knows where they're going they'd better drive," he said. "The far beach," she called out. "Well, in God's name!" he muttered. Still he drove off.

"Are you crowded at the back?" he said later in a worried voice. A sudden schoolgirl hilarity took her.

"We like it," she cried loudly, giggling. And pressed her legs against Alex.

She was immediately ashamed of her voice. Before she could stop herself, she cried out:

"I've got my young man."

She swaggered her arm through his and laughed loudly close to his face. She was horrified at herself. He laughed discreetly, in a tolerant elderly way at her. So they bumped and brushed over the bad roads to the beach. Coram swore it would break the springs of his car, this damfool idea. She could see the sweat on her husband's thick pink neck. She goaded him. She called to him not to crawl, not to bump them about, not to take the town road but the other. Coram turned angrily to her.

She wanted to show the young man: You see, I don't care. I don't care how revolting I am. I don't care for anything. I hate everything except a desire that is in me. There is nothing but that.

The car topped the hill and she turned her head to look back upon the town. She was surprised. Two belfries stood above the roofs. She had never seen them before. The clay-coloured houses were closely packed together by the hills, and those that were in the sun stood out white and tall. The roofs went up in tiers and over each roof a pair of windows stared like foreign eyes. The houses were a phalanx of white and alien witnesses. She was startled to think that she had brought her life to a place so strange to her. She and her husband had lived in the deeply worn groove of their lives even on this holiday, and had not noticed the place. Her mood quietened.

The outlying villas of this side of the town were newer and the air burned with the new resinous odour of the pines and the two flames of sea and sky.

"I often come this way," said the Jew, "because there is more air. Do you know the waiter in the café by the harbour? On one hot day last year he chased his wife's lover down the street, loosing off a revolver. He breaks out once a year. The rest of the time he is the perfectly contented complaisant husband. If the café were up here, it would not happen. Or perhaps he might only be complaisant once a year. Probably our whole emotional life is ruled by temperature and air currents."

She looked at him. "You have read your Huxley," she said dryly, "haven't you?" But afterwards she felt repentant because she thought if he was showing off, it was because he was young. "I could cure him of that."

Presently the car stopped. They had got to the beach. They sat for a minute in the car studying it. It was a long beach of clean sand, looped between two promontories of rock, a wilder beach than the one by the town where people came to picnic. Now there was no one on it. And here the sea was not the pan of enamelled water they had known but was open and stood up high from the beach like a loose tottering wall, green, wind-torn, sun-shot and riotous. The sky was whitened on the horizon. The lighthouse on the red spit eight miles across the bay seemed to be racing through the water like a periscope. The whole coast was like groups of reddened riders driving the waves into a corral.

"The east wind," said Monsieur Pierre, from his window, considering it.

They got out of the car. They walked on the sand and the waves unrolled in timed relay along the shore. The three men and Mrs Coram stood singly, separated by the wind, gazing at the tumult. They spoke and then turned to see where their words had gone. The wind had swept them from their lips and no one could hear.

Alex stayed behind, but soon he ran forward in his bathing-dress.

"You're not going!" Tom said. The sea was too wild. The Jew did not hear him and ran down to the shore.

"Oh!" Mrs Coram said anxiously and moved to Pierre.

Without a word the Jew had dived in. Now he was swimming

out. She held Pierre's arm tightly and then slowly the grip of her fingers relaxed. She smiled and then she laughed. It was like watching a miracle to see Alex rise and sink with those tall waves, strike farther out and play like some remote god with their dazzling falls. Sometimes he seemed to drop like a stone to the sea's floor and then up he shot again as if he had danced to the surface. She watched him, entranced.

"He's fine," she called. She looked for Tom. He was standing back from them, looking resentfully, confusedly, at the sea. Suddenly all her heart was with the swimmer and her mind felt clean by the cleansing sea. Her fear for him went. She adored his danger in the water and the way he sought it, the way he paused and went for the greatest waves and sailed through.

"Tom!" she called.

Before he knew what she wanted, Coram said:

"I'm not going out in that."

"Pierre is," she called. "Aren't you?"

The old man sat down on the shingle. Yes, he was going in, he said.

Alex came back. He came out and stood by the water, unable to leave it. He was fifty yards from them. Suddenly he had dived in again. Then he came out once more and stood throwing stones into the sea. She saw him crouch and his long arm fling out as he threw the stone. He was smiling when he came back to them.

They sat down and talked about the rough water. They were waiting for Pierre to go in. He did nothing. He sat down there and talked. The Jew eyed him. Eagerly he wanted Pierre to come. The time passed, and Pierre said this sea was nothing. He began to boast of a time when he had been in a yacht which had been dismasted in a gale. "I looked death in the face," he said. Coram glowered, and winked at the Jew.

The Jew grew tired of waiting and said he was going to try the other end of the beach. She watched him walk away over the sand. Like a boy he picked up stones to throw as he went. She was hurt that he went away from her and yet she admired him more for this. She leaned back on her elbow; the soft stroke of pleasure and pain was beating between her breasts, a stroke for every step of his brown legs across the sand, a stroke for every fall of the sea on the shore. She saw him at last run down to the water and go in. He went far out of sight until there was a crest

of fear to every breath of longing in her. He has gone far enough, she thought, far enough away from me.

She stood up. If she could fly in this wind over the sea and, like a gull, call to him from overhead and, pretending to be pursued, make him follow her to the shore! Then, to her surprise, he was suddenly on the shore again, standing as he had done before, studying the waves he had just been through. He stood there a long time and afterwards sat down and watched them. She called to him. It was too far. Timelessly he lived in his far-away youth. What was he doing, what was he thinking as he sat there remote in the other world of his youth?

Now Pierre had the beach to himself and there were no near competitors, he walked away and undressed. Presently he came back, short and corpulent in his bathing-dress and his red slippers. He asked particularly that Mrs Coram should be careful with his eyeglass. He fastened his helmet. Dandified, deprecating, like the leading dancer in a beauty chorus, he stood before them.

"I float naturally in the sea," he observed as if he were a scientific exhibit, "because the balance of displacement in my case is exact."

He went to the sea's edge like royalty, pausing every few yards to nod.

"Look," she said.

It was odd, for the moment, to be alone with her husband, to feel that just he and she saw this as they alone had seen many other things in the world.

"He won't go in," said Coram.

Pierre had reached the sea's edge. Impertinently a large wave broke and he stood, surprised, like an ornament in a spread lace d'oyley of surf. It swilled his ankles. He waited for it to seethe back a little and then he bent and wetted his forehead. He paused again. A green wave stood up on end, eight feet high, arched and luminous like a carved window in a cathedral. It hung waiting to crash. But before it crashed an astonishing thing happened. The fat little man had kicked up his heels and dived clean through it. They saw the soles of his red rubber shoes as he went through and disappeared. There he was on the other side of the wave in the trough and then, once again, he dived through the next wave and the next, clambering over the surf-torn ridges like a little beetle. The foam spat round him, suds of it dabbed his

face. Now his head in its red bathing-helmet bobbed up in dignified surprise at the top of a wave, now he was trudging out farther and farther into the riotous water.

"He's floating," said Tom.

"He's swimming," she said.

They talked and watched. She looked down the beach for Alex. He was lying full length in the sun.

Pierre was far out. How far they could not tell. Sometimes they saw the head bobbing in the water, sometimes they could not see him. They lost him. It was difficult to see against the flash of the sun. Nearer to them the emerald water fell in its many concussions on the shore and the shingle sang as the undertow drew back. She saw with surprise the lighthouse still racing, periscope-like, through the waves, dashing through the water and yet going nowhere. Why does he stay there, why doesn't he come back? She looked avidly to the young man stretched on the shore.

"Let's go up to the car and have a drink," said Tom.

"No," she said. "Wait."

She looked up for Pierre. He was not straight ahead of them.

"Where is Pierre?"

Ah, there he was; he was far out, swimming as far as they could see parallel to the beach.

She got up and walked along the beach. The mounting chaos of the sea was like the confusion of her heart. The sea had broken loose from the still sky and the stable earth; her life was breaking loose too from everything she had known. Her life was becoming free and alarmed. The prostration of each wave upon the sand mocked her with the imagination of desire for ever fulfilling and satiate; satiate and fulfilling. She walked dazed and giddily towards Alex as if she were being blown towards him. Her dress blew and the wind wetted her eyes. She lifted her arms above her head and the wind blew into her legs, drove back her skirts. She paused. Did he see her? Did he see her miming her passion with the wind?

She marched back to her husband. The wind caught and blew her almost unwillingly fast towards him.

"Tom!" she said. "I shall have a child by someone else."

He looked at her, in his habitual startled stupor. He hated this sea, this beach, this extraordinary country. He simply did not

believe in it. Those words seemed like the country, wild and incredible. He just did not believe them, any more than he believed that the wind could speak. God, he thought she'd had her scene for the day and had got over it.

He was struggling.

"I have decided," she said. It was an ultimatum.

He smiled because he could not speak.

"You don't believe me."

"If you say so, I believe you."

She had terrified him. He was like a man blundering about a darkened room. Say? What could he say? She'd be crying before the night was out that she could never leave him. Or would she? He was relieved to see her walk away and to sink back into his habitual stupor. When she had gone he wanted to seize her and shake her. He saw another man lying naked on her; the picture enraged him and yet it gave him the happiness of an inexpressible jealousy. Then tears came to his eyes and he felt like a child.

She was walking away looking for Pierre and thinking, "He doesn't believe me. He's a lout."

She watched Pierre as she walked. An old man, a nice old man, a funny old man. And very brave. Two unconcerned men, making no fuss, one old and one young: Pierre and the Jew.

The grace of the Jew, the comic strength of Pierre—they belonged to a free, articulate world. She was opposite to Pierre now. The sea was heavy in his course, the waves weightier there, and once or twice a roller cracked at the crest as he was swimming up it. But he was coming in, she saw, very slowly coming in. He was coming in much farther down. She came back to Tom.

"Look," she jeered. She seemed to have forgotten her earlier words. "You said he couldn't swim!" Coram screwed up his eyes. She walked down once more to the place where Pierre would land. The roar of the waves was denser and more chaotic. Tom followed her down. Pierre hardly seemed nearer. It was long waiting for him to come in.

At this end of the beach there was rock. It ran out from the promontory into the water. She climbed up to get a better view. Suddenly she called out in a controlled voice:

"Tom. Come here. Look."

He climbed up and followed her. She was looking down. When he got there he looked down too. "Hell!" he said.

Below them was a wide cavern worn by the sea with two spurs of rock running out into the water from either side of it. The enormous waves broke on the outer spurs and then came colliding with each other and breaking against the tables of rock submerged in the water, jostled, punched and scattered in green lumps into the cave. With a hollow boom they struck and then swept back on the green tongue of the undertow. The place was like a wide gulping mouth with jagged teeth. Mr and Mrs Coram could not hear themselves speak, though they stood near together looking down at the hole with wonder and fear.

"Tom," she said, clutching his arm. He pulled his arm away. He was frightened too.

"Tom!" she said. "Is he all right?"

"What?"

"Pierre—he's not coming in here?" she said.

He looked at the hole and drew back.

"Tom, he is. He is!" she cried out suddenly in a voice that stopped his heart. "He's drifting. He's drifting in here. These rocks will kill him."

Tom glared at the sea. He could see it as plainly as she. He backed away.

"The damn fool," Tom said. "He's all right."

"He's not. Look."

He was drifting. He had been drifting all the time they had talked. They had thought he was swimming parallel to the beach, but all the time he had been drifting.

They could see Pierre plainly. In five minutes he would be borne beyond the first spur and would be carried into the hole.

As he came nearer they saw him at battle. They saw him fighting and striking out with his arms and legs. His cap had come loose and his grey hair was plastered over his head. His face had its little air of deprecation, but he was gasping and spitting water, his eyes were stern and bewildered as if he had not time to decide which of the waves that slapped him on the face was his opponent. He was like a man with dogs jumping up at his waving arms. The Corams were above him on the rock and she called out and signalled to him but he did not look up.

"Are you all right?" she called.

"Course he's all right," said Coram.

It seemed to her that Pierre refused to look up, but kept his

eyes lowered. Increasingly, as he got into the outer breakers he had the careless, dead look of a body that cannot struggle any more and helplessly allows itself to be thrown to its pursuers. The two watchers stood hypnotized on the rock. Then Mrs Coram screamed. A wave, larger than the rest, seemed to dive under Pierre and throw him half out of the water. His arms absurdly declaimed in space and a look of dazed consternation was on his face as he dropped into the trough. The sun in the sky flashed like his own monocle upon him and the rich foam.

"Quick. He is going," she cried to her husband, clambering down the rock to the beach.

"Come on," she said. He followed her down. She ran towards the surf. "We'll make a chain. Quick. Take my hand. He's finished. We'll get him before he goes."

She stretched out her hand.

"Get Alex," she said. "Run and get him. We'll make a chain. Quickly run and get him."

But Tom drew back. He drew back a yard, two yards, he retreated up the beach, backing away.

"No," he said angrily, waving his arm as though thrusting her away. Yet she was not near him or touching him.

"Tom!" she called. "Quick. You can swim. I'll come."

"No," he said.

She did not see for a moment that the look of angry stupor on his face was fear, that he was prepared to let Pierre drown; and then, as he half ran up the beach, she saw it. He would not go in himself. He would not fetch Alex. He was going to stand there and let Pierre drown. "Tom," she called. She saw his thick red glistening face, his immovable glowering struggling stare. He stood like a chained man. He would stand there like that doing nothing and let Pierre drown. She was appalled.

So she ran. She ran down the beach, calling, waving to the Jew.

It happened that he had got up and was wandering idly along the surf towards them. He heard her cry and thought she was calling out with the excitement of the wind. Then he saw.

"Quick," she called. "Pierre is drowning."

She clutched his arm as the Jew came up to her. He gave a glance, jerked away her arm, and ran swiftly along the beach. She followed him. She saw him smile as he ran, the slight gleam

of his teeth. When he got near the rock he broke into a short laugh of joy and rushed into the water. In two strokes he was there.

She feared for both of them. She saw a wave rise slowly like an animal just behind Pierre and a second greater one, green as ice and snowy with fluttering spume, following it closely. The two swimmers stared with brief, almost polite surprise at each other. Then the Jew flung himself bodily upon Pierre. An arm shot up. Their legs were in the air. They were thrown like two wrestlers in the water. There was a shout. The Jew came up, his arm went out and his hand—the big hand she had seen upon the table that morning in the Pension—caught the old man under the armpit. They were clear of the rock. They swayed like waltzing partners and then the enormous wave picked them both up, tossed them to its crest and threw them headlong over and over on the shore. The falling wave soaked Mrs Coram as they fell.

Monsieur Pierre crawled dripping up the shingle and sank down panting. His face was greenish in colour, his skin purple with cold. He looked astonished to be out of the sea. The Jew had a lump the size of an egg on his shin.

"I thought I was finished," Pierre said.

"I'll get some brandy," Mrs Coram said.

"No," he said. "It is not necessary."

"You saved his life," she said excitedly to the Jew.

"It was nothing," he said. "I found myself the current out there is strong."

"I could do nothing against the current," Pierre said. "I was finished. That," he said in his absurd negligent way, "is the second time I have looked death in the face."

"Rub yourself with the towel," she said.

He did not like being treated as an old man.

"I'm all right," he said. After all, once he had attempted to swim the Channel. Perhaps they would believe now he was a swimmer.

"It is always you good swimmers who nearly drown," she said tactfully.

"Yes," Pierre boasted, becoming proud as he warmed up. "I nearly drowned! I nearly drowned! Ah yes, I nearly drowned."

The emotion of the rescue had driven everything else from her mind. The scene was still in front of her. She looked with fear still at the careless water by the rock where only a few minutes ago she

had seen him nearly go. Never would she forget his expressionless head in the water. With the eyelids lowered it had looked grave, detached, like a guillotined head. She was shivering: her fingers were still tightly clenched. Supposing now they had M. Pierre dead beside them. How near they had been to death! She shuddered. The sea, green and dark as a blown shrub, with its slop of foam, sickened her.

He is not very grateful, she thought. And she said aloud:

"Monsieur Pierre, but for Alex you would be dead."

"Ah yes," said Pierre, turning to the Jew not very warmly. "I must express my warmest thanks to you. That is the second time I have looked . . ."

"You get no credit," she said to Alex in English just in her husband's way. It was odd how she had his habit in a time of stress. "He thinks he's immortal."

"Parlez français," said Pierre.

"She says," said Alex quickly, "that you are immortal."

All this time she was standing up. One side of her dress had been soaked by the wave which had borne them in. As she talked she could see Tom standing forty yards off. He was standing by the car as if for protection and half turned from the sight of the sea. She was still too much in the excitement of the rescue, going over it again and again, to realize that she was looking at him or to know what she thought of him.

"We must get you home," she said to Pierre, "quickly."

"There is no hurry," he said with dignity. "Sit down, Madame. Calm yourself. When one has looked death in the face . . ."

She obeyed. She was surprised they thought her not calm. She sat next to Alex as all the afternoon, when he had gone off, she had wished to do. She looked at his arms, his chest and his legs as if to find the courage shining on his body.

"It was nothing." She could see that this was true. It had been nothing to him. One must not exaggerate. He was young. His black hair was thick and shining and young. His eyes were young too. He had, as she had always thought, that peculiarly ancient and everlasting youth of the Greek statues that are sometimes unearthed in this Mediterranean soil. He was equable and in command of himself, he was at the beginning of everything, at the beginning of the mind and the body. There was no difficulty anywhere, it was all as easy as that smile of his when he ran into

the water. Had she been like that when she was young? How had she been? Had everything been easy? No, it had been difficult. She could not remember truly, but she could not believe she had ever been as young as he was young. Without knowing it, she touched his bare leg with two of her fingers and ran them down to his knee. The skin was firm.

"You're cold," she said. The coldness startled her. He had probably never slept with a woman. She found herself, as she touched that hard body which did not move under her touch, pitying the woman who might have slept with this perfect, impersonal, impenetrable man.

There was resentment against his perfection, his laugh in the water, his effortless achievement. He showed no weakness. There was no confusion in him. There was no discernible vice. She could not speak.

And now, as she calmed down and saw Tom, her heart started. She saw, really saw him for the first time since the rescue and went up the tiring shingle to him. He was still standing against the car.

"The damn fool," Coram said before his wife could speak. "Trying to drown others besides himself. They're all alike."

"It is no thanks to you that we saved him," she said. "Leave it to me! You ran away!" she said angrily.

"I didn't," he said. "Drown myself for a fool like that? What do you take me for? He wasn't drowning anyway."

"He was," she said. "And you ran away. You wouldn't even go for Alex. I had to go."

"No need to shout," he said. She stood below him on the shingle and he winced as if she were throwing stones at him.

"These people get me down in this place," he said, "going into a sea like that."

"You ran away when I called," she insisted.

"Are you saying I'm a coward?" he said.

He looked at her small, shrilling figure. She was ugly when she was in a temper, like a youth, gawky, bony, unsensual. Now she had joined all the things that were against him. The beauty of this country was a fraud, a treachery against the things he had known. He saw the red street of his childhood, heard the tap of his father's hammer, the workers getting off the trams with their packages and little bags in their hands, the oil on their dungarees.

He heard the swing door of his laboratory, the drum of machines and smoke drooping like wool through the Midland rain, saw the cold morning placards. That was his life. The emeralds and ultramarine of this sea and the reddened, pine-plumed coast made him think of those gaudy *cocottes* he had seen in Paris. The beauty was corruption and betrayal.

He did not know how to say this. It was confused in his mind. He blustered. He glared. She saw through the glowering eyes the piteous struggle, the helpless fear. He was ugly. He stood there blustering and alone with his dust-covered car, an outcast.

"I'm saying you could have helped," she said.

She looked in anger at him. Her heart was beating loudly, her blood was up. It was not the rescue—she half realized now—which had stirred her—but the failure to rescue. From the very moment when he had run away, something in her had run after him, clamouring for him, trying to drag him back. Now, his muddle seemed to drag her in too.

"Help that swine!" he said.

Pierre and Alex came to the car carrying their towels.

"You think of no one but yourself," she said to her husband in front of them. "For God's sake let's get home."

Everyone looked at her apprehensively. Coram got into the car and she, determined not to let him escape one moment of her contempt, sat beside him. Pierre and Alex were at the back. In silence they drove from the beach and over the hill from which the white town could be seen stacked closely in the sun, like a pack of tall cards. As the car crawled through the narrow streets which were crowded in the evenings with holiday-makers and workers who came up from the harbour or down from the fields, Pierre put his head out of the window. He waved to friends sitting in cafés.

"I nearly drowned!" he called out. "I nearly drowned."

"Drowned?" people laughed, getting up from their tables.

"For the second time in my life," he called, "I have looked death in the face."

"Tiens!"

"Yes, I nearly . . ."

Coram trod on the accelerator. Pierre fell back into his seat, his little scene cut short, as they swerved up the dusty road to the Pension.

Coram was silent. They got out and he went to put the car away. Pierre went to his room and she and Alex went up the stairs of the shuttered house to their rooms. She was ahead of him. When she got to his landing she saw his door was open. She turned and said:

"May I see what you are like?"

"Of course," he said.

She went into his room and he followed her. The shutters were closed and the room was dark and cool. There was the white shape of the bed, the pile of books by its side, the white enamel basin on its iron stand and his suitcase on a chair. He went to push open the shutters.

"Oh, don't do that," she said. But one shutter slipped open. Her face was white and hard, tragically emptied of all expression as she looked at his polite face.

There was nothing.

She went over and lay on the bed. He raised his eyebrows slightly. She saw him raise them.

"They are hard in this house," she said. "The beds."

"A bit," he said.

She leant up on one elbow.

"You were plucky," she said, "this afternoon. But my husband ran away."

"Oh no," he said. "He had not changed. He had not been in."

"He ran away," she said. "He wouldn't even go and fetch you."

"One could not expect . . ." Alex began.

"You mean you are young?" she said.

"Yes," said Alex.

"My husband is my age," she said in a hard voice. "Turned forty."

"I admired what you did," she said.

He murmured something politely. She got up and sat on the edge of the bed.

"My skirt," she said, "was soaked. Look."

She pulled it above her knees. "Feel it," she said.

He came close to her and felt the frock. She stared into his eyes as he touched the cloth. She was shivering.

"Close the door," she said suddenly. "I must take it off. I don't want Monsieur Pierre to see me." He closed the door. While his

back was turned she picked up the hem of her frock and pulled it over her head. She stood bare-legged in her white underclothes. The shoulder strap slipped over her arm. She knew that he saw her white breast.

"In England this might be misunderstood," she said, with a loud nervous laugh. "But not in France." She laughed and stared, frightened at him.

"I'm old enough to be your mother, aren't I?"

"Well, not quite," he said.

She was nearly choking. She could nearly scream. She was ugly and hideous. She had wanted to show him what she was. "Feel how cold I am," she said, putting out her leg. He put his hand on her white thigh. It was soft and warm. He was puzzled.

"Do you mind?" she said. She lay back on the bed. Tears came into her eyes when she spoke.

"You are young," she said. "Come and sit here."

He came and sat on the edge of the bed beside her. He was very puzzled. She took his hand. But there was no desire in her. It had gone. Where had it gone? She dropped his hand and stared helplessly at him. She saw that he did not want her and that it had not occurred to him to want her. If she had drawn his head down to her breast she would have been cold to his touch. There was no desire, but only shame and anger in her heart.

"I suppose," she said suddenly, with a false yawn, "that this is a little unconventional."

To her astonishment he got up.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked in a mocking voice to call him back. "Hardly, I expect, not yet. You are only a child."

Before he could answer she said:

"Too young to sleep with a woman."

Now he looked embarrassed and angry. She laughed. She got up. She was delighted she had made him angry.

She took her frock and waited. Perhaps he would attempt to kiss her. She stood waiting for him. But he did not move. Slowly a horror of what she was doing came over her. There was no desire. She saw too a remote fear of her in his brown eyes.

"Thank you," she said. She put the frock against her breast and went to the door. She hoped for one more humiliation when she opened it: that she should be seen, half naked, leaving his room. But there was no one on the stairs.

From the landing window as she went up she saw the familiar picture. The military rows of the vines in the red soil. The shadow-pocked mountains, the pines. It was like a postcard view taken in the sun, the sun not of to-day but of other days, a sun which was not warm but the indifferent, hard, dead brilliance of the past itself, surrounding her life.

She lay down on her bed and sobbed with misery and shame as a broken creature will abase itself before a bloodless, unapproachable idol. She sobbed because of her ugliness and of the ugliness of having no desire. She had abased and humiliated herself. When had the desire gone? Before Alex had rushed to the rescue into the sea it had been there. When?

It had gone when she had heard her husband's refusal and had seen the fear and helplessness in his eyes, the muddle in his heart. Her desire had not gone winged after the rescuer, but angry, hurt, astounded and shocked towards her husband. She knew this.

She stopped weeping and listened for him. And in this clarity of the listening mind she knew she had not gone to Alex's room to will her desire to life or even to will it out of him, but to abase herself to the depths of her husband's abasement. He dominated her entirely, all her life; she wished to be no better than he. They were both of them like that; helpless, halted, tangled people, outcasts in everything they did.

She heard him coming up the stairs.

"Tom," she called. "Tom."

She went avidly to the door.

That evening in the quietness after dinner some friends of Pierre's came in to hear about his escape. He wore his yachting-cap that night. Death, he said, had no terrors for him, nor had the sea. In his case the balance of displacement was exact; once already he had looked death in the face. . . . He was the hero. He did not once refer to his rescuer. Two of the guests were English, a Colonel and his wife, and to them Coram, also, told the story. He stumbled over his words. He lumbered on. They sat under the massed black leaves of the mulberry tree.

Mrs Coram sat there calm, clever and experienced, as she always was. Here and there, as she always did, she helped her

husband over the story. "Let me tell you what happened," she said, smiling. They turned to her with relief, and Coram himself was grateful.

Wonderful story she always tells, they said. Ought to write. Why didn't she take it up? "Go on, Mrs Coram, give us the lowdown."

They all laughed, except Pierre, under the trees. He was out of his depth in so much quick English.

It was ridiculous, she said, in her quickest voice, glancing at Alex, to go out in a sea like that. She described the scene.

"Tom tried to persuade him not to go, but he would. You know how vain they are," she said. "And then," she said as they laughed with approval and caught the excitement of her story. "Poor Tom had to go in and rescue him."

She looked at them. Her eyes were brilliant, her whole body alive with challenge as she glanced from her visitors to Alex and Tom.

"B . . . " Tom began.

"Alex was at the other end of the beach and Tom had to go in and rescue him," she repeated.

She looked at all of them with defiance and a pause of pity for Alex; at Tom, like a cracking whip before a too docile lion. The Corams against the world.

A Story of Don Juan

ONE night of his life Don Juan slept alone. Returning to Seville in the spring, he was held up, some hours' ride from the city, by the floods of the Guadalquivir, a river as dirty as an old lion after the rains, and was obliged to stay at the finca of the Quintero family. The doorway, the walls, the windows of the house were hung with the black and violet draperies of mourning when he arrived there. Quintero's wife was dead. She had been dead a year. The young Quintero took him in and even smiled to see Don Juan spattered and drooping in the rain like a sodden cockerel. There was malice in his smile: Quintero was mad with loneliness and grief. The man who had possessed and discarded all women was received by a man demented because he had lost only one.

"My house is yours," said Quintero, speaking the formula. There was bewilderment in his eyes; those who grieve do not find the world and its people either real or believable. Irony inflects the voices of mourners, and there was malice, too, in Quintero's further greetings; he could receive Don Juan now without that fear, that terror which he brought to the husbands of Seville. It was perfect, Quintero thought, that for once in his life Don Juan should have arrived at an empty house.

There was not even (as Don Juan quickly found out) a maid, for Quintero was served only by a manservant, being unable any longer to bear the sight of women. This servant dried the guest's clothes and in an hour or two brought in a bad dinner, food which stamped up and down in the stomach, like people waiting for a coach in the cold. Quintero was torturing his body as well as his mind, and as the familiar pains arrived they agonized him and set him off about his wife. Grief had also made Quintero an actor. His eyes had the hollow, taper-haunted dusk of the theatre as he spoke of the beautiful girl. He dwelled upon their courtship, on details of her beauty and temperament, and how he had rushed her from the church to the marriage bed like a man racing a tray of diamonds through the streets into the safety of a bank vault. The presence of Don Juan turned every man into an artist when

he was telling his own love-story—one had to tantalize and surpass the great seducer—and Quintero, rolling it all off in the grand manner, could not resist telling that his bride had died on her marriage night.

“Man!” cried Don Juan. He started straight off on stories of his own. But Quintero hardly listened; he had returned to the state of exhaustion and emptiness which is natural to grief. As Don Juan talked, the madman followed his own thoughts like an actor preparing and mumbling his next entrance; and the thought he had had, when Don Juan first appeared at the door, returned to him: a man must be a monster to make a man feel triumphant that his own wife was dead. Half-listening, and indigestion aiding, Quintero felt within himself the total hatred of all the husbands of Seville for this diabolical man. And as Quintero brooded upon this it occurred to him that it was probably not chance that he had a vengeance in his power.

The decision was made. The wine being finished, Quintero called for his manservant and gave orders to change Don Juan’s room.

“For,” said Quintero dryly, “his Excellency’s visit is an honour and I cannot allow one who has slept in the most delicately scented rooms in Spain to pass the night in a chamber which stinks to heaven of goat.”

“The closed room?” said the manservant, astonished that the room which still held the great dynastic marriage bed and which had not been used more than half a dozen times by his master since the lady’s death was to be given to a stranger.

Yet to this room Quintero led his guest and there parted from him with eyes so sparking with ill-intention that Don Juan, who was sensitive to this kind of point, understood perfectly that the cat was being let into the cage only because the bird had long ago flown out. The humiliation was unpleasant. Don Juan saw the night stretching before him like a desert.

What a bed to lie in: so wide, so unutterably vacant, so malignantly inopportune! He took off his clothes, snuffed the lamp wick. He lay down knowing that on either side of him lay wastes of sheet, draughty and uninhabited except by bugs. A desert. To move an arm one inch to the side, to push out a leg, however cautiously, was to enter desolation. For miles and miles the foot

might probe, the fingers or the knee explore a friendless Antarctica. Yet to lie rigid and still was to have a foretaste of the grave. And here, too, he was frustrated; for though the wine kept him yawning, that awful food romped in his stomach, jolting him back from the edge of sleep the moment he got there.

There is an art in sleeping alone in a double bed, but this art was unknown to Don Juan. The difficulty is easily solved. If one cannot sleep on one side of the bed, one moves over and tries the other. Two hours or more must have passed before this occurred to him. Sullen-headed, he advanced into the desert, and the night air lying chill between the sheets flapped and made him shiver. He stretched out his arm and crawled towards the opposite pillow. The coldness, the more than virgin frigidity of linen! He put down his head and, drawing up his knees, he shivered. Soon, he supposed, he would be warm again, but, in the meantime, ice could not have been colder. It was unbelievable.

Ice was the word for that pillow and those sheets. Ice. Was he ill? Had the rain chilled him that his teeth must chatter like this and his legs tremble? Far from getting warmer, he found the cold growing. Now it was on his forehead and his cheeks, like arms of ice on his body, like legs of ice upon his legs. Suddenly in superstition he got up on his hands and stared down at the pillow in the darkness, threw back the bedclothes and looked down upon the sheet; his breath was hot, yet blowing against his cheeks was a breath colder than the grave, his shoulders and body were hot, yet limbs of snow were drawing him down; and just as he would have shouted his appalled suspicion, lips like wet ice unfolded upon his own and he sank down to a kiss, unmistakably a kiss, which froze him like a winter.

In his own room Quintero lay listening. His mad eyes were exalted and his ears were waiting. He was waiting for the scream of horror. He knew the apparition. There would be a scream, a tumble, hands fighting for the light, fists knocking at the door. And Quintero had locked the door. But when no scream came, Quintero lay talking to himself, remembering the night the apparition had first come to him and had made him speechless and left him choked and stiff. It would be even better if there were no scream! Quintero lay awake through the night, building castle after castle of triumphant revenge and receiving, as he did so, the ovations of the husbands of Seville. "The stallion is

gelded!" At an early hour Quintero unlocked the door and waited downstairs impatiently. He was a wreck after a night like that.

Don Juan came down at last. He was (Quintero observed) pale. Or was he pale?

"Did you sleep well?" Quintero asked furtively.

"Very well," Don Juan replied.

"I do not sleep well in strange beds myself," Quintero insinuated. Don Juan smiled and replied that he was more used to strange beds than his own. Quintero scowled.

"I reproach myself; the bed was large," he said.

But the large, Don Juan said, were necessarily as familiar to him as the strange. Quintero bit his nails. Some noise had been heard in the night—something like a scream, a disturbance. The manservant had noticed it also. Don Juan answered him that disturbances in the night had indeed bothered him at the beginning of his career, but now he took them in his stride. Quintero dug his nails into the palms of his hands. He brought out the trump.

"I am afraid," Quintero said, "it was a cold bed. You must have *frozen*."

"I am never cold for long," Don Juan said, and, unconsciously anticipating the manner of a poem that was to be written in his memory two centuries later, declaimed: "The blood of Don Juan is hot, for the sun is the blood of Don Juan."

Quintero watched. His eyes jumped like flies to every movement of his guest. He watched him drink his coffee. He watched him tighten the stirrups of his horse. He watched Don Juan vault into the saddle. Don Juan was humming, and when he went off was singing, was singing in that intolerable tenor of his which was like a cock-crow in the olive groves.

Quintero went into the house and rubbed his unshaven chin. Then he went out again to the road where the figure of Don Juan was now only a small smoke of dust between the eucalyptus trees. Quintero went up to the room where Don Juan had slept and stared at it with accusations and suspicions. He called the manservant.

"I shall sleep here to-night," Quintero said.

The manservant answered carefully. Quintero was mad again and the moon was still only in its first quarter. The man watched

his master during the day looking towards Seville. It was too warm after the rains, the country steamed like a laundry.

And then, when the night came, Quintero laughed at his doubts. He went up to the room and as he undressed he thought of the assurance of those ice-cold lips, those icicle fingers and those icy arms. She had not come last night; oh, what fidelity! To think, he would say in his remorse to the ghost, that malice had so disordered him that he had been base and credulous enough to use the dead for a trick.

Tears were in his eyes as he lay down and for some time he dared not turn on his side and stretch out his hand to touch what, in his disorder, he had been willing to betray. He loathed his heart. He craved—yet how could he hope for it now?—that miracle of recognition and forgiveness. It was this craving which moved him at last. His hands went out. And they were met.

The hands, the arms, the lips moved out of their invisibility and soundlessness towards him. They touched him, they clasped him, they drew him down, but—what was this? He gave a shout, he fought to get away, kicked out and swore; and so the manservant found him wrestling with the sheets, striking out with fists and knees, roaring that he was in hell. Those hands, those lips, those limbs, he screamed, were *burning* him. They were of ice no more. They were of fire.

Pocock Passes

THE cities fall, but what survives? It is the common, patient, indigenous grass. After Mr Pocock's death this thought lay in a muddle in Rogers's mind; if Rogers had a mind. He was enormously fat; a jellyfish which is washed and rocked by sensations and not by thought. The Wilcoxes, the Stockses and Rogerses, the three ordinary, far-back tribes who made the village, alone had history; and this plain corporate history, like the eternal grass, choked out the singular blooms. The death of a Rogers is something. A card is shuffled into another pack and he joins the great phalanx of village Rogerses beyond the grave, formidable in their anonymity. But the death of a stranger like Pocock, who had been in the place only a few months, was like a motor smash. Vivid but trivial, it sank out of village memory to the bottom of time.

Rogers admitted to himself that he had had a fright. Mr Pocock had been a man of fifty like himself, as fat as Rogers was, too—they had compared waist measurements once—and he drank heavily: that came home rather close. So close that although Rogers was Mr Pocock's only friend in the last months of his life, Rogers could not bring himself to go to the funeral. He put on his black to show willingness, but at the hour of the funeral slipped on the doorstep and twisted his knee and had to be kept in his house. With a sort of penitence or hoping for a last order, Askew, the village publican, went—he followed all his customers to the end—and came back saying:

"Mr Pocock, he drank too much. I often tried to stop him."

Then it was that Rogers, who had gone to the pub once the funeral was over and Pocock was set in his grave—then it was that Rogers saw a profound truth:

"You're wrong there," he said.

"He didn't drink too much," he said. "The trouble with Mr Pocock was that he didn't drink enough."

One thing the death of Mr Pocock did for Rogers was to make him stay at home. There was nothing to go out for. Outside was the road, the village, the four-eyed faces of the villas called Heart's

Desire Estate which Rogers had built on the flat fields and had sold before anyone had discovered that the site was a water meadow. There was his wooden hut too, where he slept over the typewriter sometimes, and with its Estate Agent's plate on the door. His wife ran his business now—such as it was. Above all this was the sky. He was inclined to see a hole in things like the street or sky after Pocock's death, a hole with simply nothing beyond it. Staying at home with his family kept Rogers from seeing the hole. Hearing his wife use the typewriter or telephone in the office, drinking a cup of tea, listening to his two girls, torpidly watching them, his slow mind lay down like a dog in the domestic basket. "Wife and family—you're lucky, ol' boy," Mr Pocock had said many times in his husky, half-rapacious voice. Rogers brooded. Perhaps he, surviving, was the better man.

Yet with all his heart and with some plain builder's shrewdness and village vanity, Rogers had wanted to believe in the singularity of Mr Pocock. People came down from London and took a house in old age, and when they died, these strangers always turned out to be less than they had at first seemed to be. He was used to that. A handful of dust—often scandalous dust—was all they were against the great tribal burial mound of the village Wilcoxes, Stockses and Rogerses. Pocock had not only looked different but had sounded different and behaved accordingly. Yet the death of Pocock had left in Rogers's mind some suspicion of fraud—indeterminate yet disturbing, like waking in the night and thinking you smell a carpet smouldering, and yet no coal on it when you get out to look.

Pocock was a painter. Not only that, he was a well-known painter from London; he knew other painters. Not only other painters, but studios and actresses. He knew the stage. Yet after the ambulance went like a soft clap of low white wings between the hedges of the main road, taking Pocock to the hospital and his end, Rogers said to people who had come to look at property, "We had Pocock here." They merely said blankly, "What's that? Never heard of him." No one at all had heard of Mr Pocock, the famous painter.

Rogers and Mr Pocock had come together not because of their minds or tastes but because of their bodies. They were drawn will-lessly together by the magnetic force of their phenomenal obesities. There is a loneliness in fat. Atlas met Atlas,

astonished to find each saddened by the burden of a world. Rogers was short and had that douce, pleading melancholy of the enormous. His little blue eyes, above the bumps of fat on his cheek-bones, looked like sinking lights at sea; and he had the gentle and bewildered air of a man who watches himself daily getting uncontrollably and hopelessly fatter. His outsize navy-blue jacket hung on him like another man's overcoat. The coarseness and grossness of his appearance, the spread of his nostrils, the crease of his neck, gave him a pathos: there is an inherent delicacy, a dignity and spirituality in pork. He lived in a quiet sedentary fever in which, as his own bounds daily grew, the world seemed farther away to him. His gentleness was like that of the blind, indicating how far he was from other people. There was no one like him in the village. Rogers was a show-piece. His visits to the public-house were a hopeless try for gregariousness, but there were no seats broad enough in the tap, it didn't "do" for him to go to the bar where his workmen were and, anyway, there were no seats in it. He went instead to the small parlour and was usually there alone, like a human exhibit, with an aspidistra and a picture of Edward VII.

Rogers's first impression, as he came into the parlour one night, was that an enormous bull terrier in a black-and-white chessboard jacket had got up on to a chair in the darker corner. Rogers's perceptions were slow; but at last he saw the figure was a man and not a dog. Between the check suit and check cloth hat was a face, a raw-meat face which had grown a grey moustache, and under that was a small, furiously proud and querulous mouth. An old dog who would fly out at you if spoken to. The check coat went on to check knickerbockers. There was a rose in Pocock's buttonhole—the smell of the rose and of Turkish cigarettes in the room—and he had a spotted bow to his collar. But what surprised Rogers, after he had said "good evening" and was leaning forward with the usual difficulty to tap the bell on the table, was the stranger's voice. Husky, swaggering, full-tempered, it said, daring you to contradict and yet somehow weary, "What are you having, old boy?"

Deep called unto deep: Rogers saw to his astonishment, not a stranger, but a brother. Not his blood brother, of course, but something closer—a brother in obesity.

Mr Pocock's was a different kind of fatness, tight where Rogers's

was loose, dynamic where Rogers's was passive and poetic, aggressive where Rogers's was silkily receptive. Mr Pocock's pathos was fiery and bitter. A pair of stiffly inflated balloons seemed to have been placed, one under and one above Mr Pocock's waist-line, and the load forced his short legs apart on either side of the chair, like the splayed speckled legs of a frog. And there was another bond. Mr Pocock, it was evident, was a drinker. A gentleman, too (Rogers observed), as the evening went on, arrogantly free with money. A sportsman also. There were a couple of illustrated papers on the table and one had a photograph of tropical game. A peeress had taken these photographs. One showed a hippopotamus rising like a sofa out of a lake.

"Damn' cruel, old boy," said Mr Pocock in a grating gasp, having an imaginary row with the aristocracy and Rogers about it. "All these bloody white women following poor defenceless animals around with cameras, old boy. Bloody hippopotamus can't even drink in peace. Animals much sooner be shot, old boy—what?"

Yes, Mr Pocock was a sportsman, a blaspheming sportsman of some elegance, for now Rogers noticed a couple of rings on one hand.

Yet not a sportsman, after all, for he looked bored when Rogers spoke of the duck and snipe and the teal which float like commas on the meres at the back of the village.

"Can't eat it, old boy," replied Pocock. "Game's poison to me. Bloody waste of time following birds, if you ask me. Need every ounce of daylight for my work."

The bell on the table was tapped again and again. In and out went Askew, the publican. Even he straightened up under the snapping orders of Mr Pocock.

And there was no reserve in Mr Pocock. His talk was free and self-explanatory. "I've come down here to see if there is anything," said Pocock. "If there is, well and good. If not, all right. There may be something."

(What? wondered Rogers.)

"I've got to, old boy," said Mr Pocock. "I've got to cut down the overheads. Have another, old boy? With this bloody crisis," he said with an angry and frightened look in his eyes. "I had my own studio in London and a housekeeper, but with this crisis,

and the critics in league against you, the bottom's gone out of things. There may be something here—I don't know—two rooms, a bed, a table, do my own cleaning up and cooking—that's all I want and no women about. No," said Mr Pocock, "no more women."

"You married, old boy?" asked Mr Pocock.

"Yes," said Rogers.

"You're lucky, old boy," said Mr Pocock. "Bloody lucky. Excuse my language, old boy, but woman's a b . . ."

"Oh, fifty-fifty," said Rogers, not clear whether he meant only half lucky or wholly lucky to have a wife he could share everything with, she doing the office work and looking after his house while he built up his figure and did the drinking. For Rogers had reached the point of saturation in his own life when drinking was work. It never stopped.

Rogers's slow mind wanted to explain, but Pocock interrupted.

"I know, old boy. You can't tell me anything about women. They're a bloody question-mark, old boy. There's two answers to it, one's right and one's wrong. When I want what I want, I don't ask anyone's opinion, I go and get it."

"What?" added Mr. Pocock.

"You're right," said Rogers in his slow, groping voice. "You know the story of the couple who . . ."

They didn't laugh out loud at the story. Rogers shook and shook and his eyes sank out of sight. Mr Pocock strained in his chair and seemed to fizz with austere pleasure like a bottle of soda-water.

"It's nature," said Mr Pocock when his head stopped fizzing.

Rogers was out of his depth here. His head was lolling forward. He had reached the stage when Mr Pocock had a tendency to rise to the ceiling and then to drift away sideways towards the door in great numbers.

"Take salmon," said Rogers heavily, this coming into his mind at the moment.

"Salmon, old boy? Why bloody salmon?" said Mr Pocock.

"They go . . ." said Rogers. "They go—up fresh water."

"Salmon?" said Mr Pocock. "Salmon? They come from the sea."

"They don't breed in it," said Rogers uncertainly. He was beginning to forget why he had mentioned them.

"I know," said Mr Pocock peremptorily. "They live in the sea and go up the river when they feel like it."

"Feel like it," repeated Rogers. Somewhere near here was the reason for raising the matter.

". . . I've seen 'em, old boy," continued Mr Pocock, putting down his glass with a bang.

"Out of the sea," insisted Rogers.

"Don't be bloody funny, old boy," said Mr Pocock, banging his glass again. "We know they do."

The landlord called "Time."

Rogers and Mr Pocock got up with common difficulty, exchanging a look of sympathy. Foot by foot, after they had unbent, stopping between paragraphs, they talked and stopped their way out of the public-house and outside its door. Facing the night, surprised by it, they halted again. The moon arrested them. It was a white full moon, the most obese of planets, with its little mouth open in the sad face.

"Just made for an artist, I should say," said Rogers, slapped across the face by the cold wind, but warm within in his linings. Yet as a villager he had an obscure feeling that for a London stranger to paint the place insulted it. His feeling was primitive; he did not want the magic of an alien eye upon his home.

"It *used* to be pretty, old boy," said Mr Pocock. "Till some bastard ran up those bloody villas."

"I put them up ten years ago," said Rogers dispassionately; and he meant that time justified and forgave all things.

"Good God, old boy. Bloody ugly," fizzed Mr Pocock.

They stared at the villas and grinned, almost sniggered, like boys peeping through a fence at something shocking. It gave Rogers and Mr Pocock pleasure, they being human, to know the worst about each other. And as they gazed with tenderness upon the raped virgin, the sight started Pocock's mind on his own affairs and prompted him to the words which were the final thing to bind Rogers to him.

"I don't mind telling you, old boy, I've been hurt," Mr Pocock said. "I've had a jerk. I haven't told a bloody soul so far, but I'll tell you. *Last year I started living on my capital.*"

Rogers turned his back on Mr Pocock and affected to look up the road for traffic. It was empty. All lights in the village houses were out. He felt a stirring of the bowels. His wife did not know,

he hardly let himself know—but he, too, had passed the crest of his life, he, too, was beginning the first harassed footsteps downhill, crumbling away to pieces like a town in a fog, and no one, hitherto, to watch or share the process. Rogers also had started living on his capital.

After this, day by day, they sought each other out like two dogs. First of all they were halting and suspicious. Rogers said, "Have you been painting, Mr Pocock?" but this was not, he discovered, a welcome question. Mr Pocock replied that he was sizing up the situation. Midday, Mr Pocock could always be found sizing things up at The Grapes or The Waggoner. He was sizing up and settling in. And, anyway, he hadn't been feeling too well lately.

"Been having trouble with my foot," said Mr Pocock defiantly at Rogers.

"It's the weight you carry," said Rogers. "I get it myself."

Mr Pocock, as one heavy drinker to another, appreciated the tact of that lie.

"I keep clear of doctors, old boy," said Mr Pocock. "Always have."

"They cut you down," said Rogers, emptying his glass.

"All wrong, old boy," said Mr Pocock. "Want to kill you."

At night they met like lovers. They were religious drinkers. Whisky was Mr Pocock's religion, beer was the faith of Rogers. An active faith ranges widely. After the public-houses of the village there were two or three on the main road. The headlights of cars howling through the dark to the coast picked out two balloons in coats and trousers, bouncing and blowing down the road. Dramas halted them.

"What's that, old boy?"

"Rabbit."

"No, old boy, not a rabbit. It was a fox. I know a fox."

"I reckon it was a stoat."

The point became intricate under the stars.

"Bring Mr Pocock in to supper one evening," Mrs Rogers said. She was a plump, practical woman, with hair set like a teacake. She was a one-time nurse, abnormally good-tempered, pleasantly unimaginative. She ate well and enjoyed the anxiety of being the business management of an exhibit like her husband. Incapable herself of his deterioration, hers was the craving, so

strong in the orderly and new, for its opposite, the romantic ruin. Rogers, like many men, and especially drinking men, who neglect their wives and are slowly ruining their families, had an ideal picture of his family in his mind, a picture to which his fancy was always putting more delicate touches of reminiscence. For, like all the world beyond his hazy corpulence, his family became remote, a little farther away each day, like a memory or an old master.

"Bloody funny thing, old boy," Mr Pocock said. "When I paint a picture, I get a feeling I have for a woman."

It was Rogers's feeling about his own picture, of his family, that private masterpiece of his. Rogers wasn't interested in any other pictures; Mr Pocock wasn't interested in domestic life. And The Crown was placed strategically between their homes.

About once every couple of months, Mr Pocock hinted, he "broke out". He always had. He always would. There was a large manufacturing town with a river, pleasure-boats and a Hippodrome twenty miles away, where life, said Rogers, abounded. He and Mr Pocock put roses in their buttonholes, cigars in their mouths and went. Rogers explained that he hadn't seen quite so much life since he was married, but when he was a youngster . . . Oh dear. This stirred up memories in Mr Pocock. They arrived and, to make a start, went to the station buffet. After this the past was vivid. They went to the Hippodrome for the second act of a play about divorce. The seats were narrow and Mr Pocock said he couldn't breathe. They left. Mr Pocock said all this modern stuff was dirty. Nothing but sex. (What's yours, old boy?) Dirt, like Epstein and Cézanne.

The last train back was the 12.17. It brought the Hippodrome people. For a long time the station with its hoardings and iron and glass façade seemed unattainable, but at last, after a long time on the kerb opposite, they rushed it. The train was crowded. Rogers had been sorry to leave the Hippodrome. He smiled, wagging his head, thinking about it, then he began to laugh and nudge his neighbours. They were soon entertained by Rogers. It was like the old days.

"I've been divorced to-day," Rogers suddenly said; "and he's my co-respondent." Mr Pocock at once offered him a cigarette. Rogers refused.

"Why do you refuse my cigarettes, old boy?" Mr Pocock asked abruptly. He was out for a quarrel.

"Do you think I want your wife?" exclaimed Mr Pocock angrily. Rogers laughed idiotically.

"Because you're a swine if you do," said Mr Pocock.

But they didn't fight. They got out at their station, helped out by the passengers, and the guard, while the engine-driver watched from the cab. They passed Rogers's villas.

"Damned awful, old boy," said Mr Pocock.

"Come in," said Rogers when they got to his house.

A look of sobered terror came into Mr Pocock's face.

"Your wife in?" he said.

"She's in bed," Rogers said.

"Thank God," said Mr Pocock. "I'm drunk."

"Come in," said Rogers.

"She'd hear my language," said Mr Pocock. Rogers opened the door and led the way into the sitting-room.

Mr Pocock sat down while Rogers went to the whisky-bottle.

"It's empty, old man," Rogers said, looking blankly at Mr Pocock.

"Thank God, old boy." Mr Pocock stood appalled, like a man who had never been in an inhabited house before. He looked shocked. He saw with horror the cretonne-covered sofa, the photographs, the slim silver vases with maidenhair fern in them.

"She's taken the other one away and put this one here."

"Women," said Mr Pocock.

They stared at each other.

"Come round to my place," said Mr Pocock.

Still talking, they went out, leaving the door open. A woman's head appeared at the window.

"Alfred!" the voice called.

Rogers stopped and stared at Mr Pocock. Mr Pocock stared back like a fierce dog at Rogers.

"Better answer, old boy," said Mr Pocock, banging his stick on the ground.

"Yes," called Rogers.

"Had a good time?" said the woman's voice. They could not see her in the darkness, but Mr Pocock raised his hat.

"Better go," he whispered.

He went off alone. Rogers followed him at last. Mr Pocock's

house was the last of a row of labourers' cottages, one room and the scullery downstairs and two little rooms up. Now Rogers was shocked by what he saw. In the downstairs room was an old bit of carpet laid to the edge of a cooking range, and the carpet was stained with grease. Tins and the remains of a meal were on the table. Mr Pocock used only one of the rooms upstairs. They went up. Its boards were bare. There was a suitcase on the floor and there was an iron bed and a chair. The place smelled of mice and also of the smoking candle stuck on the mantelpiece. They sat down.

"That's what I ought to have done—got married," said Mr Pocock. His face looked greenish in the candlelight. "Bloody lonely without a woman, old boy."

"There's a woman," Mr Pocock exclaimed violently. There were canvases stacked against the dirty wall. He turned one round. He filled his glass. What Rogers saw shocked him. It was the picture of a thin, dark-haired woman sitting on a bed, naked. Not lascivious, not beautiful, not enticing, just naked, and seeming to say, "It don't feel natural, I mean having nothing on."

"Oh dear, oh dear," was all Rogers could say. He went hot. It was the painting of the bed that shocked him. Mr Pocock seemed to him a monster.

Mr Pocock began to boast and Rogers hardly listened. There was a bottle of whisky. Rogers's eye kept going with astonishment to the picture. A dancer, Mr Pocock said. He knew all the stage crowd, he said. Could have had her, he said. Words and words came out of Mr Pocock, gobbling and strutting like a blown-out turkey in the room, words making an ever-softening roar in the set, cold silence of the cottage where no clock ticked.

Suddenly Rogers had a shock. It was daylight. He had been asleep on the floor and the sun was shining on him. He gaped. There was Mr Pocock on the bed. Still holding his cane, the rings shining on his podgy fingers which had grey hair at the knuckles, Mr Pocock lay. He was snoring. His body heaved up and down in the loud suit, like a marquee with the wind loose in it. Remote in sleep with his picture near him, Mr Pocock looked sacred and innocent, in the bare room.

The spring came with its glassy winds, its air going warm and cold and the lengthening light becoming frail in the evenings. Rogers and Mr Pocock were both ill. Rogers received illness as

part of his burden; he was more aware of his wife and of his children when he was ill. But Mr Pocock was an aggressive invalid. He saw conspiracy. He was terrified and he blustered to conceal this and made war on the doctor. He would not stay in bed.

"Kimble thinks he's got me, old boy. Knocked off my beer and cut me down to two whiskies a day. It isn't right! It isn't human! He's got to be fair."

When Rogers got up they met in the pub.

"I've had seven, old boy," Mr Pocock said. "But if Kimble says anything to you about what I drink—it's two. I've treated him fairly. I've been reasonable. That man wants to kill me. But not a word to him! You've got to deal with these doctors."

First of all when he had come to the village Mr Pocock had a charwoman to clean and wash up for him, but he was hardly ever in his cottage and he ate at any time. He had got rid of the charwoman and looked after himself. He had brought his bed downstairs when he was first ill because he had been frightened in the upstairs room. One night he felt tired and low. A bus-ride had upset him. He went to bed early. In the middle of the night he woke up in black terror. He felt sick and he was fainting, and he was sure he was in London. He reached for his stick and knocked on the floor to make the woman come up to him, the woman whose portrait Rogers had seen and who lived downstairs. All the night sleeping and waking he dreamed he was knocking to make himself heard on the floor. For the model, then for Mrs Rogers, then for his mother.

In the morning he could hardly move. Then he remembered he was on the ground floor and had been knocking on the carpet which covered the flags, which covered the earth. He had been knocking on the hard crust of the earth. All he could do was to crawl from his bed to the cupboard where the whisky-bottle was and then crawl back. But he called no one; he stiffened with anger if there were any signs of anyone coming to the door. He was not going to be caught like this. He was not going to admit anything. He cursed the doctor.

It was two days before Mr Pocock's illness was discovered.

"Mr Pocock's ill," Rogers's wife brought the news. She knew all the illnesses of the village.

Rogers sat up, alert. He was at once frightened for himself.

He did not want to see Mr Pocock before the doctor had been. Rogers sat in his chair, unable to move. He wanted to do something for Mr Pocock, but he was paralysed. He sat in a stupor of inertia and incompetence. He looked appealingly at his wife. She got a car and had Mr Pocock brought to the house.

"It's the bloody sugar, old boy," murmured Mr Pocock with a regal weariness as three men carried him upstairs.

Mrs Rogers was glad when the ambulance came that, for once in his life, Mr Pocock had had a real home with a woman to look after him.

That was the last of him.

A dealer came down to look at the pictures after the funeral, but he would not take them. One or two others came hoping for frames. But the twenty-odd canvases there had no frames on them. A brother came down to clear up Mr Pocock's affairs.

"We never corresponded," said the brother. Of all things he was a clergyman.

Two fair and tall young men in suède shoes and pullovers, so alike they looked like a pair of tap-dancers, turned up at the same time. They *were* tap-dancers.

"Terrible," they said. They were looking at the pictures; but Rogers supposed they referred to the death, the poverty of the house—or perhaps the clergyman. Rogers had been told by Mr Pocock that in reward for his kindness he might have one of the pictures, but he did not know which to choose. The only picture he felt anything about was the picture of the nude. He detested it.

"Women," he thought, "that must have been Mr Pocock's trouble. Not drink. Oh dear, not drink, women." So when everyone had gone he took the small picture, wrapped it in newspaper and put it in a shed in his garden. That picture, and a corkscrew which he stuffed in his pocket, because a corkscrew was useful. He took the picture because, without knowing it, he felt it symbolized the incomprehensibility of the existence of other people. The corkscrew was the man he knew, the picture the man he did not know at all. He thought that one day he had better destroy the picture—in case a bad impression of his friend was formed.

And so, slipping out of the funeral, keeping in the background afterwards, staying in his own house, Rogers eluded the memory

of Mr Pocock. Rogers was forgetting everything as he grew larger. He forgot yesterday, last week, last year—he dreamed through time like an idle whale, with its mouth open, letting what would come into it. He contemplated through a haze his own work of art—his family. He watched his wife's second chin when she gave her practical laugh. His two girls swam up to him like fish. They were an extra pair of eyes and ears for him. They saw things quickly. They laughed at things long before he heard them. On Saturdays he took them to the cinema. Every Saturday. A year passed, and then two years. He never said now, "We had Mr Pocock, the painter, here." He had learned his lesson.

And then came the most extraordinary fortnight of Rogers's life. He was with his daughters in the cinema. They were watching a gangster film. A film four years old: they only got the old films in these country towns. Two men were going quietly up the stairs of an hotel and then along a corridor. It was at night. They were making for the room where a Mexican, behind closed doors, was covering a girl with a gun. But they were not sure of the room. They hesitated at doors. It was trying for Rogers, because his mind was still in the pillared lounge below, reminded by it that he was living on his capital. How had the Mexican got the girl in the room? Then the two men stopped. One said "O.K.," and they pushed open a door marked 13 and switched on the light. Rogers's daughters jumped in their seats and a shout of laughter came from the audience. A large, round-faced man with a huge stomach was lying on a bed in check suit and knickerbockers, asleep and snoring, with a bottle, rolled on its side, near by.

"Mr Pocock!" the girls shouted.

It was. Rogers's heart went small in his chest and seemed to shoot like a stone in his throat. The gangsters rolled their eyes ironically. The audience laughed. One of the gangsters picked up the bottle and made to prod Mr Pocock with it. The audience sent up blast after blast of laughter; especially shrill laughter went up first from the children in front. The other gangster touched his friend's arm, raised his eyes to the ceiling and said, "R.I.P." Wave after wave of laughter passed by as the snores stopped and then began again like a car toiling and missing up hill.

"It's Mr Pocock, Mr Pocock, Dad," Rogers's daughters cried,

jumping on their seats. And the laughter went on. For the achievement of Mr Pocock was that he did nothing, nothing at all. He just lay and snored, the human balloon.

Rogers couldn't believe it.

It became urgent for him after this to decide the matter. Films in the town moved down the road, ten or twenty miles, to the next place in the week. Four times he followed that film in a fortnight. Four times he saw that scene. It was unmistakably Pocock. And each place the audience roared until one night at the Hippodrome, where it was the big picture, he heard a packed house shout out with enthusiasm at Pocock's sublime unconsciousness. He had three minutes of the film, but those three minutes brought the house down.

It terrified Rogers. Pocock was lying exactly as Rogers had seen him that morning after the binge when he had woken up in Pocock's cottage. He dreaded that the eyes would open, the voice speak. And then, after the sixth time of seeing the film, as he walked home down the village street he longed to meet that preposterous figure, to slap him on the back and tell him. He longed for him to wake up on the screen and hear that helpless applause, to see those wide-open laughing mouths. He kept it quiet, thought Rogers. And the drowning soul saw no irony in it all; but rather felt that life was incomprehensible no more. Something had been settled.

When he took the picture from his garden shed and burned it on the rubbish heap soon after, Rogers heard in the husky roar of the flame the sound of a soul set free, all stain removed.

A Spring Morning

AFTER many days of rain came a cleansed and miraculous morning when the larks went up straight from the dykes, lifting the sky higher with every leap. They stayed there singing; while above them the planes of the aviators droned like metallic bees and the air thrilled in a fine breeze from the sea. People walking in the village dipped their bodies in the sunlight and raised their faces to the perfectly blue sky with pleasure for the first spring sun was shining.

A girl was whistling loudly at the door of a shop. She whistled through a gap between two prominent front teeth. She was a thin girl, ill-nourished, with blue eyes too close together and fair hair chopped short and brushed off her bony face. Over her body was a long pink evening-dress and on her feet was a frayed pair of evening-shoes which slopped about as she pretended to waltz to her whistles.

One side of the village street was in the sun and the other in shadow. It was a quiet place, yet sounds came from it, sounds by which were measured its great quietness. Here a window squealed open, here a carpet was beaten, here the double tap of a boatman's hammer, the step of a man in the street, the sudden rattle of a car, the throb of the hourly bus, or even the sound of the girl whistling—all these sounds came singly, exceptionally, measuring off the silence of the village and the people possessed by the first sun of the year.

Soon a youth wearing a dirty pair of canvas shoes came shuffling up the street with a puppy tearing at his shoe-laces. The girl, who was alone in the shop, stopped whistling when she saw this fat, pale youth with his thick unbrushed hair and his pimpled skin. He was wearing oil-stained trousers and jersey and he slouched along with his hands in his pockets. His eyes were so pale that they scarcely showed in his freckled unshaven face.

"Minding the shop?" he called.

He grinned as he nodded to the door, showing his very yellow teeth.

"Take care that don't run away," he said. He gave her a look

up and down from the points of her half-formed breasts to her feet, and then with a spit moved on, ignoring her; but when he had got ten yards away he stopped dead to stare at an aeroplane in the sky.

The girl recovered and stiffened.

"Eh!" she screeched. "*You* take care or you might get a job of work."

"Nothing doing," he said, speaking up at the aeroplane. When he turned he caught the scornfulness in her look and slowly, smiling, threatening, he came back towards her. He came nearer and nearer, and when he was so close that she could smell the breakfast tea in his warm breath on her cheeks he took one hot fat freckled hand out of his pocket and leaned his arm on the door-post above her head. Then he looked over her shoulder impertinently into the shop. She was alarmed because he was nearly touching her.

"You can't come in," she said.

"Who said so?"

"You can't come in."

She barred the way, but he was smiling and not even looking at her.

"How much is that bit of firewood?" he asked, pointing to a chair in the shop.

"I shan't tell you."

He took no notice, with his shadow on her, staring over her shoulder into the shop and giving a nod to each thing there, the china, the glass, the mirrors, the desks, mockingly.

"Don't want nothing," he said at last.

His face was nearly touching hers; slowly he took down his arm from the door-post and, for a moment, his hand hovered as if to touch her. Then it dropped and he whistled up his dog, and without moving a step away from the girl he bent down with his back to her. The dog was a small black-and-grey spaniel and he rolled the creature over and over, tickling its mottled belly, running his fingers into its mouth and making it snap and slobber and bark.

"Here," she said. "Get out of the light."

He went on rolling the puppy over and over and took no notice of her. At last he yawned and got up, still with his back to her.

"Coming out?" he said without interest.

"No," she said at once, with satisfaction.

It was a slow morning, slow with the sun, slow the tide opening its fan of water in the creek, slow the hours and slow the breeze. When the church clock struck, the green bus came down and was backed round at the bottom of the road by the sea. The driver got off and walked round to the sunny side of the bus in pursuit of the conductor. They followed each other round like two dogs.

The girl gazed at them. They were men in uniform, working to time. The driver, who was always looking at his watch, said the word and the conductor gave the engine a turn, the bell struck and off they went, sticking up their thumbs as they passed their friends. "Thumbs up," they called to the postman, the policeman, the passing bus drivers on their route, and the sunlight sizzled on the radiator caps. "Thumbs up," they repeated.

The girl gazed where the men had been, and where they had been the youth was standing. His dusty shoulders were in a lump and, although she tried, she could not stop looking at him. She looked at the way he planted his legs, at the set of his buttocks, at his neck, the bow of his calves, at the back, broad, dusty, indolent, and the hang of his heavy arms.

"Afraid to come in?" she taunted.

He looked round at once, but she was not there, because she dodged back quietly to hide in the shop. He kicked the dog away from him and went to the door.

"Gerout!" he said to the dog.

The moment he went in he hesitated because he was awed by the valuable things in the shop and because he did not know who might come out of the inner door, but in the half darkness her pink dress was brilliant and he could not resist her stiff, glittering cunning. All he could do was to laugh and take her wrist. She tried to pull herself away.

"Leave me be."

"Leave you be!"

"There's someone coming."

"No there ain't."

"You're not to. I shall call out. . . ."

Now he got hold of both wrists. His mouth was open. She was angry and helpless, her fingers crooked, trying to scratch at his face. He laughed at her with what breath he had.

"Huh! Huh! Skinny," he laughed.

He did not know what he wanted to do and she did not know what she did not want him to do. They just stood fighting.

At last, with a push, he sat her into a chair and dropped her wrists. The moment he did so she flew at him like a cat and smacked him on the face.

"Here, hold on!" he said. And after a pause: "What's the big idea?"

"You dirty beast," she said.

"I never touched you," he said.

"Chance is a fine thing, isn't it?" she taunted.

Her lips quivered until she grinned as he stared back at her staring, narrow, combative, hungry face. Then he made a leap at her. He had his arm round her waist and his fingers on the hollow of her spine at once. She was dragged and rubbed in confusion against him. He kissed her roughly on the lips and would not release her, though she pushed with her knees and her hands against him. There was the smell of tobacco from his mouth and the smell of oil on his clothes. Then suddenly he released her and stood without anything to say. He laughed. His eyes were sparkling. Her lips were wet; her face was marked red and startled; and her child's eyes, which had the cunning-old-woman-look of a child, were now the melting blue, hazy eyes of a young woman. She propped her heels on the step and made herself tall so that she could look at him proudly. But her heart was striking against her chest, and her aching lips were bruised with kissing.

When he had gone away up the street to sit on the kerb with his puppy once more, she could still feel the fading mark of his lips. She crinkled her eyes in the sunlight, swaying and dipping her arms in the white warmth. In the sky droned the men from the aerodrome. Their planes slid down the face of the sky, making scars of pale exhaust. They roared up again, twirled slowly over and whined down in long dives which scribbled their flight over the sky, until they set off once more in their formations and their roar rained down upon other country.

She was driven straight out of the shop towards him and he stood up waiting for her to come and be near to him. But a gate clicked and another girl, a dark and placid one, came out of a garden, and the two girls ran to each other with shouts. They put their hands on each other's shoulders and whispered, bending

together and laughing over their shoulders at him. He stepped across to them. They gave screams and ran for the shop. There in the doorway they laughed and then disappeared laughing into the shop, laughing and laughing. Twice they came to the door and laughed, and then screaming ran to laugh inside. She stood and laughed in the face of the dark girl and the dark girl laughed in her face too.

"Whoop!" shrieked the girl, driving the dark one before her and bringing a pail of water out of the shop. A chair was brought out too and she climbed on to it to clean the window, watching her reflection dance from one small pane to the next as she worked. When she reached for the higher panes she hoped her dress was not caught up because she could see him in the glass still lounging there.

"You do hang around," she bawled at his reflection. He let all that die away.

"Why don't you go for a soldier?" she yelled. Dragging his feet he came slouching across to her, grinning, kicking the puppy, spitting.

"Eh?" she screamed. She picked up the pail and lugged it to the gutter. Then she lifted it. "Wake up," she cried suddenly and emptied the whole pailful over him.

A white flash of water, a shout, a flop as the water fell, the roar from him and the yelp of the puppy scampering out of the mess. She stared. She dropped the pail. She went white. She gave a choking laugh and then she bolted. Into the shop she rushed, slamming and locking the door. The soaked youth rushed after her, but she was safe, white, startled, putting her tongue out at him. He flew at the door and rattled its handle. Water was running off his face, dripping from his nose.

"You wait," he shouted. "You wait."

Then the green bus came down and the twelve o'clock whistle blew. She saw him go off. Very hot, her heart beating loudly, she waltzed in the room with stupefied gaiety and whistled through her big teeth.

The Two Brothers

THE two brothers went to Ballady to look at the house. It was ruinous but cheap, there were miles of bog and mountain alive with birds, there was the sea and not a soul living within two miles of it. As had always happened in their childhood and as had repeatedly happened since the war when "the Yank" had returned to the Old Country to look after his sick brother, "the Yank," with his voracious health, had his way.

"Sure it's ideal," yelled the Yank.

The time was the spring.

"We'll take it for six months," he exclaimed.

"And after that?" asked Charlie, watching him like a woman for plans and motives he had not got.

"Och, we'll see. We'll see. Sure what's the use of worrying about the future?" said the Yank.

He knew and Charlie knew the question hung over them; the future watching them like an eagle on a rock, waiting to shadow them with its wing. In six months he would be left alone. He knew how the Yank, his brother, dealt with time. Out came his gun and he took a pot-shot at it, went after it, destroyed it and then laughed at his own skill and forgot.

In the sky and land at Ballady there was the rugged wildness of farewell. This was the end of the land, prostrating itself in rags before the Atlantic. The wind stripped the soil so that there was no full-grown tree upon it, and rocks stood out like gravestones in the bigoted little fields. A few black cattle grazed, a few fields of oats were grown, the rest was mountain and the wide empty pans of bog broken into eyes of water. The house lay in a hollow out of sight of the sea, which was only half a mile away. It was a grey, rambling place of two storeys with outhouses and stables all going to pieces. It was damp, leaky and neglected and barely furnished. There were fuchsia bushes growing right up to the windows, beating against them and blinding them in the gales, pressed close as people in the night. The garden was feet deep in grasses, the gravel drive had become two grass ruts, and for a gate there was an iron hurdle propped against a gap in the stone wall. From

the hill above Ballady Charlie and Micky had made out its slate roof silvery in the light, the ribs of the roofless stable like a shining skeleton.

"The way it is," the Yank explained when he went in to Ballady alone for a drink now and then. "The poor bloody brother he's after having a breakdown." The Yank was a wild, tall, lean, muscular fellow, straight and springy as a whip, with eyes like dark pools, with bald brows, lips loose and thin, and large ears protruding from his bony skull. His black hair stood up straight and was cropped close like a convict's, so that the skin could be seen through it; his nose was straight and his face was reddened by the wind. He went about with a cigarette in the corner of lips askew in a conquering grin, and carried a gun all day. A breezy, sporting chap. He wandered up and down the bog and the fields or lay in the dunes waiting; then, bang went his gun, the sea-birds screamed over the sand and up he got from his knees to pick up a rabbit or a bird. The sun burned him, the wind cut him, the squalls pitted him like shot. He had no secrets from anyone. Fifteen years of Canada, he told them, four years of war, and now for a good time while his money lasted. Then, he said publicly to all, he would go back. All he wanted now was a bit of rough country, a couple of drinks and a gun; and he had got them. It was what he had always wanted. He was out for the time of his life.

How different Charlie was, slight and wiry, nervous and private as a silvery fish. His hair was fair, almost white, and his eyes were a keen dark blue in the pupils and a fairer blue was ringed round them. His features were sharp and he kept his lips together and his head down as he walked, glancing nervously about him. He looked like a man walking in his thoughts. If, when he returned from the sea, he saw someone in his path, he dodged away and made a long detour back to the house. If taken by surprise and obliged to talk to a stranger, he edged away murmuring something. His voice was quiet, his look shrill, pleading and shy. He was absorbed in the most private of all pieties, the piety of fear to which his imagination devoted a rich and vivid ritual.

He did not badger his brother with speech. He followed him about the house, standing near him, asking with his eyes for the virtue of his brother's strength, courage, company and protection. He asked no more than his physical presence and to watch. In

the mornings at first, after they had established themselves in the house, there was always this situation: Micky restless, burning to be out with his gun, and Charlie's eyes silently asking him not to go. Micky bursting to be free, Charlie worrying to hold him. Sometimes Micky would be melted by an unguarded glance at his brother. For a moment he would forget his own strength and find himself moved by an awed tenderness for this clever man who had passed examinations, stayed in the Old Country, worked his way up in a bank and then, when the guns had started to popple, and "the troubles" began, had collapsed.

Micky was kind and humoured him. They would sit for hours together in the house, with the spring growing in the world outside, while Charlie cajoled him with memories of their boyhood together, or listened to Micky's naïve and boasting tales of travel. In those hours Charlie forgot the awful years, or he would have the illusion of forgetting. For the two surrounded themselves with walls of talk, and Charlie, crouching round the little camp-fire of his heart, used every means to keep the talk going, to preserve this picture of life standing as still as a dreamy ship in haven and himself again a child.

But soon the sun would strike through the window and the fairness of the sky would make Micky restless. He would lead his brother, by a pretext, into the garden and slyly get him to work there, planting lettuces or digging, and when he had got him to work he would slip away, pick up his gun and be off to the dunes.

Shortly after moving into the house, Micky went into Dill, got drunk as was his habit, and returned with a dog, a young black retriever, very strong, affectionate and lively. He did not know why he had bought it and could hardly remember what he had paid for it. But when he got home he said on the impulse to Charlie:

"Here, Charlie boy. I've bought you a dog. One of the priest's pups."

Charlie smiled slightly and looked in wonder.

"There y'are, man," Micky cried. "Your dog."

"Hup! Go to your master," said Micky, giving the dog a push, and sent it over to Charlie, who still incredulously gazed.

"Now that's kind of you," he murmured, flushing slightly. He was speechless with pleasure. Micky, who had given the animal

to his brother on the spur of the moment, was now delighted with himself, sunned in his generosity.

"Sure, now ye've got yer dog," Micky kept saying, "ye'll be all right. Ye'll be all right now ye've got the dog."

Charlie gazed at Micky and the animal, and slyly he smiled to himself; Micky had done this because he had a bad conscience. But Charlie put these thoughts aside.

Both brothers devoted themselves to the retriever, Micky going out and shooting rabbits for it, and Charlie cooking them and taking out the bones. But when Micky got up and took his gun and the retriever jumped up to go out with him, Charlie would whistle the dog back and say:

"Here! Stay here. Lie down. Ye're going out with me in a minute."

It was his dog.

At last Charlie went out and the watchful creature leaped out with him. Charlie drew courage from it as it loped along before him, sniffing at walls and standing stiff with ears cocked to see the sudden rise of a bird. Charlie talked to it in a low running murmur hardly made of words but easing to the mind. When it stopped, he would pass his clever hands over its velvety nose and glossy head, feeling the strange life ripple under the hair and obtaining a curious strength from the tumult. Then he would press on and whistle the creature after him and make across the fields to the long finger-bone of rock that ran down to the sea; but as the retriever ran it paused often, as Charlie began to note with bewilderment and then with dread, to listen for Micky's voice or the sound of his gun.

When he saw this, Charlie redoubled his efforts to win the whole allegiance of the dog. Power was renewing itself in him. And so he taught the dog a trick. He called it over the rocks, slipping and yelping, to the sea's edge. Here the sand was white, and as the worlds of clouds bowled over the sky to the mountains where the light brimmed like golden bees, the sea would change into deep jade halls, purple where the weeds lay and royal blue under the sparkling sun, and the air was sinewy and strong. Charlie took off his clothes and, shivering at the sight of his own thin pale body, his loose queasy stomach and the fair sickly hairs now picking up gold from the light, and with a desire to cleanse himself of sickness and fear, lowered himself cautiously into the green water, and

wading out with beating heart called to the dog. It stood up whining and barking for a while, running up and down the rock, and at last plunged in pursuit. Then the man caught hold of its tail and let himself be towed out to sea, and for minutes they would travel out and out until, at a word, the dog returned, snorting, heart pumping, shoulders working and eyes gazing upwards and the green water swilling off its back until it had pulled Charlie back into his depth.

Then Charlie would sit drying himself and listening to the scream of the birds while the black retriever yelped and shivered at his side. And if Micky were late for his meal when he returned, through drinking with the schoolmaster or going away for a day to the races, Charlie would say nothing. He would build up a big turf fire in the empty room and wait with the dog at his side, murmuring to it.

But it took Charlie hours to make up his mind to these expeditions, and as time went on they became irregular. There were days when the absences of his brother left him alone with his fears, and on these days he would helplessly see the dog run after Micky and go off with him. Soon it would hardly obey Charlie's call.

"You're taking the dog from me," Charlie complained.

"Sure if ye'd go out the dog'd follow you," said Micky. "Dammit, what's the use of staying inside? I don't want the dog, but the poor bloody creature needs a run an't follows me. It's only natural."

Natural. That's it, Charlie reflected. From him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath. But he cried out sharply:

"Sure you have it trained away from me."

Then they quarrelled, and Micky, thinking his head was getting too hot for his tongue, went out to the dunes and stood in the wind staring at the sea. Why was he tied to this weak and fretful man? For three years since the end of the war he had looked after Charlie, getting him out of hospital and into a nursing-home, then to houses in the country, sacrificing a lot of his own desire to have a good time before he returned to Canada, in order to get his brother back to health. Micky's money would not last for ever; soon he would have to go, and then what would happen?

But when he returned with cooler head, the problem carelessly

thrown off, he was kind to his brother. They sat in eased silence before the fire, the dog dreaming at their feet, and to Charlie there returned the calm of the world. His jealousies, his suspicions, his reproaches, all the spies sent out by his reconnoitring fears, were called in, and with Micky he was at peace and no shadow of the future was on him.

Yet as the months climbed higher out of July into August and swung there awhile, enchanted by their own halcyon weather, before declining into the cooler days, the question had to be faced. Micky knew and Charlie knew, but each wished the other to speak.

It was Micky who, without warning, became impatient and spoke out.

"Lookut here, Charlie," he said one evening as he washed blood off his hands in the kitchen—he had been skinning and cleaning a couple of rabbits—"are you coming back to Canada with me in September?"

"To Canada is it?" said the brother, putting his thin fingers on the table and speaking in a gasping whisper. He stood incredulous. Yet he had expected this.

"And leave me here alone!"

"Not at all," said Micky. "I said 'You're coming with me.' You heard me. Will ye come with me to Canada?"

Charlie drew in his lips and his eyes were restless with agony.

"Sure, Micky, ye know I can't do that," he said.

"But what's to stop ye? Ye're all right. Ye're well. Ye've got your bit of pension and ye'll be as comfortable as in your own home. Get out of this damn country, that's what ye want. Sure 'tis no good at all except for old people and children," cried Micky.

But Charlie was looking out of the window towards the mountains. To go out into the world, to sit in trains with men, to sleep in houses with them, to stand bewildered, elbowed and shouldered by men in a new country! Or, as the alternative, to stay alone without Micky, left to his memories.

"You'll not leave me, Micky boy?" he stammered in panic.

Micky was bewildered by the high febrile voice, the thin body shivering like a featherless bird. Then Charlie changed. He hunched his shoulders, narrowing himself and cowering round his heart, hardening himself against the world, and his eyes shot

out suspicions, jealousies, reproaches, the weapons of a sharp mind.

"'Tis the schoolmaster has been putting you against me," he said.

Micky ridiculed the idea.

"Ye knew as well as I did, dammit, when we took the place, that I'd be going now," he said. Yes, this was true, Charlie had known it.

Micky took the matter to his friend the schoolmaster. He was a stout, hard-drinking old man with a shock of curly grey hair. His manner was theatrical and abrupt.

"'Tis the poor bloody brother," Micky said. "What am I to do with him at all?"

"Ye've no more money," said the schoolmaster.

"Ye've been with him for years," he went on. He paused again.

"Ye can't live on him."

"And he must live with you."

He glowered at Micky and then his fierce look died away.

"Sure there's nothing you can do. Nothing at all," said the schoolmaster.

Micky filled their glasses again.

He continued his life. The summer glided down like a beautiful bird scooping the light. The peasants stood in their long shadows in the fields and fishermen left their boats for the harvest. Micky was sad to be leaving this beautiful isolation.

But he had to return to the question. He and Charlie began to argue it continually day and night. Sometimes Charlie was almost acquiescent, but at last always retired within himself. Since he could not sit in the safety of the old talk, his cleverness found what comfort it could for him in the new. Soon it was clear to Micky that Charlie encouraged the discussion, cunningly played with it, tortured him with vacillations, cunningly played on his conscience. But to Charlie it seemed that he was struggling to make his brother aware of him fully; deep in the piety of his fear he saw in Micky a man who had never worshipped at its icy altars. He must be made to know. So the struggle wavered until one night it came out loudly into the open.

"God Almighty," cried out Micky as they sat in the lamplight. "If you'd been in France you'd have had something to cry about. That's what's wrong with this bloody country. All a pack of

damn cowards, and ye can see it in their faces when they stare at you like a lot of bleating sheep."

"Oh, is that it?" said Charlie, gripping the arms of his chair. "Is that what you're thinking all these years? You're saying I'm afraid, is it? You're saying I'm a coward. Is that what you were thinking when you came home like a red lord out of hell in your uniform, pretending to be glad to see me and the home? But thinking in your own heart I'm a coward not to be in the British Army. Oh, is that it?"

His voice was quiet, high and monotonous in calculated contrast to Micky's shouting anger. But his body shook. A wound had been opened. He *was* a coward. He *was* afraid. He was terrified. But his clever mind quickly closed the wound. He was a man of peace. He desired to kill no one. He worshipped the great peace of God. This was why he had avoided factions, agreed with all sides, kept out of politics and withdrawn closer and closer into himself. At times it had seemed to him that the only place left in the world for the peace of God was in his own small heart.

And what had Micky done? In the middle of the war he had come home, the Destroyer. In five minutes by a few reckless words in the drink shop and streets of the town he had ruined the equilibrium Charlie had tended for years and had at last attained. In five minutes Charlie had become committed. He was no longer "Mr Lough the manager," a man of peace. No, he was the brother of "that bloody pro-British Yank." Men were boycotted for having brothers in the British Army, they were threatened, they were even shot. In an hour a village as innocent-looking as a green-and-white place in a postcard had become a place of windows hollow-eyed with evil vigils. Within a month he had received the first note threatening his life.

"'Twas yourself," said Charlie—discovering at last his enemy. "'Twas yourself, Micky, that brought all this upon me. Would I be sick and destroyed if you hadn't come back?"

"Cripes," said Micky, hearing the argument for the first time and pained by this madness in his brother. "Cripes, man, an' what was the rest of ye up to? Serving God Almighty like a lot of choir boys, shooting up some poor lonely policeman from a hedge and driving old women out of their homes."

"Stop it," shouted Charlie as the memories broke upon him, and he put his fingers to his ears.

Micky threw his cigarette into the fire and took his brother by the shoulder in compassion. He was sorry for having spoken so; but Charlie ignored him. He spoke, armouring himself.

"So it's a coward I am, is it!" he said. "Well, I stayed when they threatened me and I'll stay again. You're thinking I'm a coward." He was resolute. But behind the shrubs brushing against the window, in the spaces between the cool September stars, were the fears.

There was nothing else for it. Charlie watched Micky preparing to go, indifferent and resigned, feeding his courage on this new picture of his brother. He turned to it as to a secret revelation. Micky was no longer his brother. He was the Destroyer, the Prince of this World, the man of darkness. Micky, surprised that his good intentions were foiled, gave notice to the landlord, to force Charlie. Charlie renewed the agreement. He spoke little; he took no notice of the dog, which had now completely deserted him. When Micky had gone it would be his. Charlie kicked it once or twice as if to remind it. He gave up swimming in the sea. He was staying here. He had all the years of his life to swim in the sea.

Micky countered this by open neglect of his brother. He entered upon a life of wilder enjoyment. He gave every act the quality of a reckless farewell. He was out all day and half the night. In Ballady he drank the schoolmaster weeping under the table and came staggering home, roaring like an opera, and was up at dawn, no worse for it, after the duck.

"This is a rotten old wall," Micky said in the garden one day, and started pushing the stones off the top of it. A sign it was his wall no longer. He chopped a chair up for firewood. He ceased to make his bed. He took a dozen empty whisky-bottles and, standing them at the end of the kitchen garden, used them as shooting targets. He shot three rabbits and threw two of them into the sea. He burned some old clothes, tore up his letters and gave away a haversack to the fisherman and a second gun to the schoolmaster. A careless enjoyment of destruction seized him. Charlie watched it, saying nothing. The Destroyer.

One evening as the yellow sun flared in the pools left by the tide on the sand, Micky came upon Charlie.

"Not a damn thing," Micky said, tapping his gun.

But as they stood there, some gulls which had been flying over

the rocks came inland and one fine fellow flew out and circled over their heads, its taut wings deep blue in the shadow as it swung round. Micky suddenly raised his gun and fired and, before the echoes had broken in the rocks, the wings collapsed and the bird dropped warm and dead.

"God Almighty, man," cried Charlie, turning away with nausea, "is nothing sacred to ye?"

"It's no damned good," grinned Micky, picking up the bird by the wing, which squeaked open like a fan. "Let the fish have it." And he flung it into the sea. This was what he thought of wings.

Then, with a week to go, without thinking he struck a bad blow. He went off to Dill to say good-bye to the boys; and the retriever followed him although Charlie called it back. The races were on at Dill, but Micky spent most of the time in the pubs telling everyone he was going back to Canada. A man hearing this said he'd change dogs with him. His dog, he said, was a spaniel. He hadn't it with him but he'd bring it down next fair. Micky was enthusiastic.

"I know ye will," said Micky. "Sure ye'll bring it."

"Ah, well now," said the man. "I will bring it."

"'Tis a great country the west," said Micky. "Will ye have another?"

"I will," said the man, and as he drank: "In the three countries there is not a place like this."

Micky returned the next day without the dog.

"Where's the dog?" said Charlie suspiciously.

"Och sure," began Micky evasively, realizing for the first time what he had done. "D'you see the way it is, there is a man in Dill . . ."

"Ye've sold it. Ye've sold my dog," Charlie shouted out, rushing at his brother. His shout was the more unnerving because he had spoken so little for days. Micky drew back.

"Ah now, Charlie, be reasonable now. Sure you never did anything for the dog. You never took it out. You didn't care for it . . ."

Charlie gripped a chair and painfully sat down, laying his head in his hands on the table.

"You brought the war on me, you smash me up, you take the only things I have and leave me stripped and alone," he moaned.

"Oh, God in heaven," he half sobbed in pleading voice, "will ye give me gentleness and peace!"

Now the dog was gone, Charlie sat still. He would not move from the house, nor even from the sitting-room except to go to bed. He would scarcely speak. Sulking, Micky repeated to his uneasy conscience, sulking, sulking. He's either mad or he's sulking. What could he do? They sat estranged, already far apart, impatient for the act of departure.

When the eve of his departure came, Micky was relieved to see that Charlie accepted it, and was even making it easy: and so touched was Micky by this that he found no difficulty in promising to spend that last night with Charlie alone. He remained in the house all day, and when the night came a misted moonlight gleamed on the cold roof and the sea was as quiet as the licking of a cat's tongue. Charlie drew the curtains, made up the fire and there they sat silently listening to the clock. They were almost happy: Charlie pleased to have this final brief authority over Micky; Micky relieved by the calm, both disinterested. Charlie spoke of his plans, the work he would do in the garden, the furniture he would buy, the girl he would get in to cook and clean.

"'Twould be a fine place to bring a bride to," said Micky, giving Charlie a wink, and Charlie smiled.

But presently they heard footsteps on the drive.

"What's that?" exclaimed Charlie sharply, sitting up. The mild mask of peace left his face like a light, and his face set hard.

Without knocking at the door, in walked the schoolmaster. He was in the room before Charlie could get out. He stood up and retreated to the corner.

"Good evening to ye," said the schoolmaster, pulling a bottle out of his pocket, and spreading himself on to a seat. "I came to see your brother on his last night."

Charlie drew in his lips and gazed at the schoolmaster.

"Will ye have a drink?" said Micky nervously.

That began it. Gradually Micky forgot his promise. He paid no attention to Charlie's signs. They sat drinking and telling stories. The world span round. The alarm clock on the little bamboo table, the only table in the bare room, ticked on. Charlie waited in misery, his eyes craving his brother's, whose bloodshot eyes

were merry with drinking and laughter at the schoolmaster's tales. The man's vehement voice shook the house. He told of the priest at Dill who squared the jockeys and long thick stories about some Archbishop and his so-called niece. The air to Charlie became profane.

"Isn't your wife afraid to be up and alone this time of night?" Charlie ventured once.

"Och, man, she's in bed long ago," shouted the schoolmaster. "She is that."

And Micky roared with laughter.

At two o'clock Charlie went to bed and left him to it. But he was awake at five when Micky stumbled into his room.

"Before God, man," Micky said, "I'm bloody sorry, Charlie man. Couldn't turn out a friend."

"It's too late now," said Charlie.

Micky left at seven to catch a man who would give him a lift to the eight o'clock train.

The autumn gales broke loose upon the land a month after Micky's departure and the nights streamed black and loud. The days were cold and fog came over the sea. The fuchsias were blown back and the under leaves blew up like silver hands. The rain lashed on the windows like gravel. There were days of calm and then the low week-long mist covered the earth, obliterating the mountains, melting all shapes. All day long the moisture dripped from the sheds and windows and glistened on the stone walls.

At first Charlie did not change. Forced to go to the village for groceries, he would appear there two or three times a week, saying little and walking away quickly. A fisherman would call and the post-boy lingered. Letters came from Micky. Charlie took little heed of all this. But as the weather became wilder he hung curtains over the windows day and night and brought his bed down to the sitting-room. He locked the doors upstairs, those that had still keys to them. He cooked on the sitting-room fire. He was narrowing his world, making a smaller and closer circle to live in. And as it grew smaller, the stranger the places beyond its boundaries seemed. He was startled to go into the empty kitchen, and looked with apprehension up the carpetless stairs to the

empty landing where water dripped through the fanlight and was already staining the ceiling below. He lay awake in the night as the fire glowed in the room.

One morning when he found the noises of his isolation supportable no more, he put on his hat and coat and packed his things and walked out of the house. He would stay no longer. But with his fear his brain had, as always, developed a covering cunning. He went up the lane to see if anyone was coming first. He wanted to be away from people, yet among them; with them, yet alone. And on this morning the Ballady sailor was reloading a load of turf that had fallen off his cart. Charlie returned into the house. He took off his hat and coat. He had not been out for a week because of this dread.

There was still food in tins for a few days. It was the thought that he could last if he liked, that he could keep the world off, that made him satisfied. No letters came now. Micky no longer wrote; effusive in the first weeks, his letters had become rare. Now there had been no news for a month. Charlie scarcely thought of him.

But when late in December the mists held the country finally, the twigs creaked on the drive like footsteps and the dark bushes divided in the wind as if they had been parted by hidden hands, he cowered into his beating heart, eating little, and the memories began to move and creep in his head. A letter threatened him with death. He drove alone with the bank's money. At Carragh-cross road the signpost stood emptily gesticulating like some frightened speaker with the wind driving back the words into his mouth, and the two roads dangling from its foot. He knew what had happened at Carragh-cross road. He knew what had been found there lying with one leg out of the ditch. He saw it. And Micky, the Destroyer, with his convict's head and his big red ears, shooting down the Holy Ghost like a beautiful bird, grinned there blowing smoke down his nose.

These memories came and went. When they came they beat into his head like wings, and though he fought them off with prayers, they beat down and down on him and he cried out fast to the unanswering house:

"God give me peace," he prayed. "Holy Mother of God, give me peace for the sake of thy sweet Son. . . ."

When the beating wings went, his cleverness took possession of

him again. He prepared a little food, and once or twice walked around the garden within the shelter of the walls. The ground was frozen, the air still and a lace of snow was on the paths. But if the days passed in peace, his heart quickened at the early darkness, and when the turf smoke blew back down the chimney it was as if someone had blown down a signal. One night he had a terrible dream. He was dead, he had been caught at last on the road at Carragh-cross. "Here's the man with the pro-British brother," they cried and threw him into a bog pool, sinking deeper and deeper into soft and sucking fires that drew him down and down. He was in hell. And there in the flames calling to him was a woman with dark hair and with pale insects walking over her skin. It was the schoolmaster's wife. "And he thinking you were in bed," said Charlie, amazed by the justice of revenge. He woke up gasping in the glow of the sitting-room fire, and feeling that a load was still pressing down on his chest.

In the morning the dream was still in his mind; mingling with some obscure sense of triumph, it ceased to be a dream and became reality. It became like a new landscape imposed upon the world. The voice of the woman was more real to his ear than his own breathing.

He felt free, was protected and cleansed, and his dream seemed to him like an impervious world within a world, a mirage in which he musically walked. In the afternoon he was exalted. He walked out of the house, and taking the long way round by the lanes went to the schoolmaster's. The frost still held and the air was windless, the land fixed and without colour. As it happened, the schoolmaster had taken it into his head to go as far as his gate.

"Man, I'm glad to see ye about," cried the schoolmaster at the sight of Charlie. "I meant to see ye. Come in now. Come in. 'Tis terrible lonely for you in that place."

Charlie stood still and looked icily through him.

"Ye thought she was in bed," he said. "But I'm after seeing her in the flames of hell fire."

Without another word he walked away. The schoolmaster made a rush for him. But Charlie had climbed the stone wall and had dropped into the field opposite.

"Come here. Come back. What's that you say?" called the schoolmaster. But Charlie walked on, gathering speed as he

dropped behind the hill out of sight going to his house. Then he ran for his life.

The schoolmaster did not wait. He went in for his coat, bicycled into Ballady Post Office and rang up the Guards at Dill.

"There's a poor feller here might do harm to himself," he said. "Will you send someone down?"

But on the way back to the house Charlie's accompanying dream and its hazed exaltation left him. Speaking had dissolved it. It lifted like a haze and suddenly he was left alone, exposed, vulnerable in the middle of the fields. He began to run, shying at every corner, and when he got to the house he clawed at the door and ran in gasping to throw himself on the bed. He lay there on his face, his eyes closed. There had been brief excitement in the run, but as he recovered his breath the place resumed its normal aspect and its horror became real as slowly he turned over and opened his eyes to it. And now they were open he could not close them again. They stared and stared. Slowly it came to him there was nothing in life left for him but emptiness. Career gone, peace gone, God gone, Micky gone, dog—all he had ever had, trooped with bleak salute of valediction through his mind. He was left standing in the emptiness of himself. And then a shadow was cast upon the emptiness; looking up he saw the cold wing of a great and hovering bird. So well he knew it that in this last moment his mind cleared and he had no fear. "'Tis yourself, Micky, has me destroyed," he said. He took out a razor and became absorbed in the difficulty of cutting his throat. He was not quite dead when the Guards broke in and found him.

The Upright Man

CALVERT was an upright man, tall, shy, short-stepping. His eyes were lowered and his narrow shoulders square. Proud in his poverty, he kept to himself, he feared to know himself to be known. He came to the office punctually, he hung up his raincoat and hat in the cloakroom reserved for the male staff, he changed into a grey jacket in order to save his better one, he used his own towel when he washed his thin hands. He did not stand as the other clerks did, with dejected buttocks to the cashier's fire, defying him in his absence and scattering to their stools when the blowing of a nose announced that he had arrived. Calvert did not spend himself in gestures or extravagances. He kept himself apart. He went straight to his desk, took out his blotting-paper, cleaned his pens, took down his books and, before all others, bent his body and bowed his head. The clerks smiled at him. He was fair.

The carpenter bends over his bench, the cobbler over his shoe, the mechanic over his machine, the priest over his altar, the clerk over his desk. By day, the heads of all men are bowed and their bodies bent. Not one of them is upright. Yet Calvert, the first to bow, was an upright man. Soldierly in duty, remembering his mother, scrupulous in poverty, when others laughed only smiling, saying two words while others spoke ten, eating sparingly alone, secret in life and parsimonious of himself. He trod the path of a single preoccupation, an instinctive loneliness. He conserved himself, every sinew was restraining. There were iron bars to the windows of his office. Through them, if a bowed man looked up, he saw not the sky but across the street the flat walls of windows where other bowed men worked.

At first he had been restless, his mouth had the desire to speak, his legs fidgeted on the stool—the chains unfamiliar—his hands reckoning his money, his grey eyes looking at the window-bars for a space to squeeze through and escape. "Calvert," the cashier warned him. And the chant of the office went on. He bowed his head and ducked with the rest, repentant. Then cautiously at twenty-two he let a little of himself go. He lit his eyes, guiltily

conscient of his mother and their poverty, permitted himself a little of the great secrecy of love. He cautiously looked up at the bars expecting to see a miracle, a vision, the appearance of an angel. For months he continued this deep espionage. No vision came. He bowed his head at last. He was an upright man.

Now there were two women, his mother and this other. It was his duty not to look up. She and he must save themselves. They must not speak too much, nor smile too much, nor touch too much each other's skin, in case they should love too much and exclaim out of their hearts. "How long the old live!" They sat in the evenings with his mother and with hers, looking through the fine lace curtains to the sky, waiting for the miracle. But there was no sky. There were the walls of lace curtains in the houses opposite and behind them invisible presences looking up. For ten years looking through lace curtains for a miracle they brought laughter to others.

Clerks flung their lives about and committed follies. One married to a voracious wife drank on Thursdays a glass of stout. One who copied weighing slips gave imitations of the voice of the cashier. One who was bald put his hand down the blouse of his secretary and was slapped in the face. One would absent himself for twenty minutes in the morning to read the newspaper in the lavatory. One going deaf turned to an Oriental religion. One made use of the office telephone to communicate with a book-maker. One told the Port of London Authority of an error in demurrage; it was his own. One staying after six lit his pipe. The oldest, in charge of stamps, went up in an aeroplane for a few minutes at a resort; he had married a widow. But Calvert did not so defy the gods, his gaolers.

So the gods, his gaolers, got drunk and went mad. They opened the doors of the cell, they flung in the keys. "You are not a slave. You are not a tame man," they whispered in his ears. "You are a beast and brute fighting for survival. You have saved yourself too long. Go outside," they said to him, patting him on the back. "Stand out in the air, draw yourself up to your full height, take a deep breath. Do you see? You are a man already. Your pale face is tanned by the sun, your neck is golden. Your hair which had gone dead and greasy is alive again like corn. Your shoulders are like walls, your muscles are hard. Do not lower your eyes! Do not bow your head any more! That day has passed and gone. My

dear fellow, those red spots in front of your eyes have nothing to do with your liver, they are made of blood."

"Blood?" murmured Calvert incredulously.

"Yes, yes," they said. "Blood. Life. You're a hero. Go and kill."

Women, above all, they said, expected this of him. Now was the time to save nothing but to spend all.

He mistrusted them until they said, remembering his tradition, that it was his duty. He had bowed, but now at last had come the time of freedom and uprightness.

And indeed the whole world of men was changed. The carpenter no longer bent over his bench, nor the mechanic over his screw, nor the cobbler at his last, nor the clerk at his desk. They were not many bowed men. They were all upright, bolt upright, chins up, shoulders back, forefinger on the seam of trousers, and they marched on grass under the sky. Like upright gods they marched, strong, healthy and beautiful. Women watched them. They would never go back they said. Many indeed did not.

For it appeared that this was a trick. They were made to stand in rows in trenches as they had sat in rows at desks, but the pens they now used required two arms to lift. The cashiers had three stripes on their arms, the partners red bands to their hats. The bars of the office windows had become bars of wire. Accounts were opened and kept, but not of bales. It soon became the habit not to be an upright man, but to duck the head once more. Looking at the sky, they saw miracles but they were sulphurous, and there was a tone of hoarse, consumptive wailing in the voices of the angels as they passed over to be entertained unawares.

But Calvert was an upright man. He had waited long with great passion. He had waited to make a life for himself. He had come to the end of his loneliness. Recklessly he talked, loudly he laughed. He entered into fellowship. He had to spend himself and all his life, to laugh with his whole body, to love and die and live again with his whole nature. This was a supreme duty. All his life he had waited, to stand in all his stature and fullness, attending the Passion. And after sundown between the lights of day and night when the bowed men stand up, he looked up through the wire bars at the sky, and the miracle occurred. He was shot by a sniper in the head.

First of all it was as if, angered with his standing, the earth had

swung up with all its metals like a pick and hit with full might upon the head, as if his life leapt from his feet and all parts of his body to that place. He fell. It seemed he was whipped off his feet while his head pealed like a helpless belfry. Now there was nothing left of him, he was scattered into fragments and flung together in an iron ball of pain, to be struck and struck until he broke into nothing but clangorous and bloody echoes; and then great toothed pliers picked him up by the skull and flung him away down into a black pit that had no end to it and measured only by the wail of his pain as he dropped down. He had not imagined a death so extravagant.

They carried Calvert away on a stretcher. He was written off the books. His name appeared in many entries. By goods, cash. His account closed, he entered into heaven where all men were lying down full length and only the angels bowed their heads over them. For a long time the hammer-on-anvil clangour of the earth was there, but slowly as he sank into heaven there was the tolerable melody of bells and endurable singing. God came in white coat and held his head together by the pressure of his hands so that these sounds died, and after God had held his head it was rigid. Calvert slept, and in his sleep lived many lives and enacted dreams. After many months his eyes, which had long been open, saw a white ceiling and a human face looking down at him. He closed his eyes, unwilling to return from the fevers of heaven from which he was drifting on the sweet stream of sleep. He could have wept that he was not dead. When again he opened his eyes two women were looking at him. One of them was old and one desired. "Save yourself," their eyes pleaded. He had nothing now to save. He had spent. "Do not let him bend his head," they said in one voice. "HE CANNOT MOVE HIS HEAD," said the doctor. "The bullet is still in it."

At this the gods sobered and grabbed back the keys. "All men to the cells," they said. "All men back to the bars. No more holidays—work!" The clerks in this new freedom were gay. One who had come to suspect Divine Justice took to games of chance. One who was bald consummated love with a telephone operator and was presented with a clock on his marriage; one saddened by an adding machine took drugs which gave him visions; one moved into a town whose train service had been electrified; one who could imitate the voice of the cashier played in an orchestra; one

sold his house at a profit; a typist given to the circulation of religious pamphlets had a week's leave to serve on a jury; many grew flowers and had newborn children.

But what can a man do in the world who cannot bend his head? Even the inspired blind who are led erect, tapping, can bend their heads and work. They can lean down to kiss, they can grope into the convulsions of love. But a man screwed upright by a bullet in his neck, a bullet like the clot of a spirit-level to be steadily carried, cannot bend over tools or ledger, nor grovel with fingers.

In this new world returning to life Calvert walked now rigid as the memory of the fear of death. Eyes now wide open, face narrow, shoulders fixed, body bleak, he was fixed in uprightness for ever. Many pitied him. But life requires pliable men. Regimentation of the pliable, they said; it was the lesson of the war. All must bend to the wheel together. No head out of alignment.

What could he do, fixed now in the discipline of uprightness for ever, not of men, lately of heaven, but not of the angels, needing to eat? He sank from plane to plane. There were two women. He had been, he said, staring, a clerk. He went from place to place asking. "There," they said, "that is what you can do." He could go from place to place, he could be a pair of hands, impersonal. Take this. Bring that. Fetch me. . . . Give him. . . . A messenger, walking from room to room, standing in lifts, waiting at desks, an intermediary, lifeless. Not a live man, not a dead man, a man now without any means of desiring anything, a man indelibly alone not looking up nor down. An upright man.

The Sniff

IT is hard to say what the present situation is, whether it is improving or whether it is becoming one of those everlasting situations that mark the characters and memories of children. These have all noticed their mother's habit of looking up from her sewing, raising her straight nose and giving a sniff as if she were going to say "Pop outside and see what's burning"—that sniff has become established since their father came back from the war. Her candid children glance at one another and then, without self-betrayal, they copy the sniff. The last one copies it loudly. It is not a snuffling nor a weeping sound; it is alert, questing and suspicious: "I think I smell burning *again*." After a few of these sniffs there is a look of wooden melancholy on her face and she sighs, she looks sullenly up at the window and the continuing daylight. She listens for footsteps upstairs, and one would say that (for her) the ceiling is like dirty thawing snow, trodden all over by the hundreds of footmarks of someone who will not come down. She is a woman of thirty-seven who has dull, fair hair, a long face, warm-tempered grey eyes, and her arms and elbows are going all day long. She has what she calls "a woman's life".

Mrs N's husband (who is the man upstairs) is her age and works in the boys' outfitting department of a big shop. He is one of those men who like to see other people promoted over their heads. The manager, Mr Frederick, for example, began in the shop, at the same counter with him. Between these two, Mr Frederick and her husband, Mrs N feels—how can she put it?—she feels that her heart has become a cage and that she cannot get out of it. Perhaps "cage" is the wrong word; for what she really feels is that she is enclosed not in bars but in a smell. She really means that: a literal smell. It is not a strong smell, for sometimes it is hardly noticeable; but it is always there, and on Saturdays and Sundays it is openly there, strong, animal and violent; so that she gets up restlessly and goes round the house unconsciously following it, searching for it, until at last she finds it. And when she finds it, she stands, as still as stone, unable to

speaking. Her husband looks up and tells her that what she needs is a holiday.

Mr N is not as tall as she is; indeed, he is not as tall as most people. His large astounded dark blue eyes are raised under caterpillar eyebrows as if he were standing on tiptoe. He has a wide swarthy face—though he lost colour when he came back from the war—a low, monkeyish forehead and a cap of black curls over his head. The widely opened eyes appear to be talking with astonishment, though in fact his lips hardly talk at all. He is astonished by the goods he sells, the customers he sees, by every woman he sees; by his wife, his children. Astonished at being married now fifteen years, astonished by what happened to him during the war. There is only one thing that does not astonish him.

When he came back from the war she saw with relief he had aged as much as she had. Those gazing doll's eyes of his, so childish and so surprised, were beginning to look out of the stupor of middle age. He looked like a man who is going to live on his kindness to himself. One good thing (she thought with pleasure, with pity and the spite that comes of dealing with children all day for years)—One good thing (she thought), the girls won't be after you. In the old days at the shop the girls were mad about him and he was mad about them. But only mad. Before she was married to him, she would have done anything to get him away from them; but once she was married she did not mind. That was the one certain control of him: the shop. The hateful thing about the war was that neither she nor the shop ruled him, and what he would be like then she could not imagine. What had happened to him during the war? He told her everything, but surely there was something else? He came back. She watched the crust of Italy and Africa pass from his skin and saw the paler man underneath appear.

"I used to think," he would begin.

Think! Imagine it, he had time to think! For five years she had been trailing after children, cooking, cleaning, mending, queuing, and he came home and told her he used to "think". Well, what was the marvellous "thought"? "Five years out of our lives," he said. Good heavens, do you call that a "thought"? There was no time to waste, you must get what you can out of life, he said. The children might be calling and she would be glad to leave the

room. No wonder he never got on at the shop, if that was what he called "thinking".

When she went out shopping, she listened to some of the other women. To the woman next door:

"They're lazy. The Army made them forget what life is like. They go round looking for one another like dogs. Don't worry. They'll settle down."

What the other women were saying with their eyes and sometimes with their tongues was, "I bet there's been another woman. They are doped with memory. Have *you* got a clear conscience?"

She almost wished there had been another woman, almost wished she had not got a clear conscience.

He was a good husband. On Saturday afternoons she went out and he stayed at home and looked after the children. She used to go out giving orders in all directions and came back to see which had been disobeyed. One of the satisfying things about him was that he was always reproachable. One Saturday when she came back from shopping and got to the gate of the house, she saw the lights were not lit. The curtains were not drawn.

In the hall no light, and in the house no sound. The air was still. The coats on their hooks, the closed doors of the rooms, the silence, indicated a place absorbed in itself. And then—her heart jumped. She was in the wrong house. This place did not *smell* like hers. She was treading on some other woman's floor-polish. She took a breath and the skin of her nostrils moved to the prick of some new smell that might have been the smell of an unsweet flower, like the garlic flower. She opened the sitting-room door and, for the first time, sniffed. The smell was not in the sitting-room. She went to the foot of the stairs and again she sniffed, but there too the scent weakened. For a moment she thought another woman was in the house and, trying the dining-room, she expected to find her sitting there, an odorous creature with bare, vaccinated arms and hot flowered lap, painting her nails, but the dining-room was empty. The scent strengthened as she approached the kitchen. Perhaps he had washed the dog, polished the brass. She opened the kitchen door and the wild smell raced to her.

"Where's the light?" she called out.

In the kitchen the daylight had decayed. He was sitting at the kitchen table with a box of oil-paints before him, his thumb in a

gaudy palette. He was painting a small picture of the kitchen with its plate-rack and sink, and beside him the children stood watching silently. Even he did not look up, but went on painting.

"Ssh," said the eldest girl, as her mother went to put her bag on the table. "Don't jog him."

The children moved nearer to protect the sacred figure of their father, who had suddenly, gloriously, without warning, taken up painting.

"Look," the children said. They opened a roll of sketches he had done in the war: crayon drawings, water-colours of soldiers, the pyramids, sand dunes, Italian towns. She could not speak.

"You never told me," she said.

She gazed at his secret life with consternation. The look of astonishment had gone from him. He looked determined, ashamed and unnaturally boastful.

"I thought I'd have a go at the old oils," he said in a dishonest voice. She looked at the sink. The washing-up was done. The room was clean. Newspaper had been spread on the table. He was wearing an old jacket. Nothing (she had to agree) was "wrong".

She laughed.

"What a blessed kid you are," she said. "Where's these poor children's teas?"

"We don't want any tea," the children said together.

"I bought myself some paints," he said in an ashamed voice. "Second-hand."

He put his brushes down.

"No," cried the children. "You haven't finished."

"The light's gone," he said. And he spoke so sadly that the children turned indignantly towards the window at the fading sky. His wife switched on the light, and she could have died laughing when she saw his face change.

"It's wrong," he said. "It's the perspective. I'll have to start again."

"Is this what they taught you in the Army?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "The only thing. Time drags, you've got to do something."

Their neighbour was a dirty, gleeful woman bobbing up and down with curiosity about everything. She wore horn-rimmed spectacles and she used to stand on a box and look over the fence

by the kitchen door. Her shoulders were out of sight and the head appeared to rest on top of the fence by itself, like a hairy bird's egg.

"We don't know what they've been through," the neighbour said.

"A man wants a hobby," his wife explained.

"Some men spend it on drink and some on women or the dogs," said the neighbour.

"He" (his wife nodded to her husband, who was crouching over his oil-paints on a kitchen chair at the end of the garden)—

"He doesn't even smoke. Every night he comes home it's the same. I wish he'd paint the kitchen."

"It keeps him in, mine's always out," said the neighbour greedily. "Has he done your picture?"

"Years ago," said his wife, "when I was in the shop, all the girls were after him, saying, 'Draw me, draw me,' posing for him, anyone would think they were—I don't know what they thought themselves."

"Film stars," said the neighbour, tidying her hair.

"Cheapening their faces I used to tell them," his wife said, remembering.

"He asked me, but I wouldn't let him. It's funny how things begin. I said to him, 'Can't you find something better to do? Or are you soft?'" She laughed.

"What did he say?" said the neighbour.

"That's how we got married. I made him stop it," she said. He stopped drawing altogether when he was in love with her.

Now he came up from the bottom of the garden, astonished of course. Astonished by the sight of the neighbour's bodiless head balanced on the wooden fence; even more astonished when a hand came up from nowhere and removed the spectacles.

"When are you going to do my portrait?" said the neighbour, with a rich and sickly smile.

He had no sense. A few weeks passed and he showed his pictures to Mr Frederick, the manager.

"Mr Frederick says I have genius," he said. That was the thing that did not astonish him.

"How that man's got on," she said. "Climbing on other people's shoulders," she said.

"You're unfair to him," he said.

"Only because he flatters you you like him," she said.

The smell was the worst thing. Sometimes he painted flowers, sometimes a corner of the garden, sometimes he tried to turn his Italian sketches into a large oil-painting; and they all smelled. He took to standing his best ones on the mantelpiece, and she knew at once. They were awkward, living, chopped-off little pictures, unbearably new—not like pictures you see in a shop or a magazine—like small joints of meat. When she knew Mr Frederick had praised them, she saw that Mr Frederick had “got on” by sheer unscrupulousness. Her husband came home, changed his jacket and went up to the box-room, and if she went there he was so absorbed he did not answer. The smell made her sniff, but he took no notice of that; he simply grunted. She sniffed. He grunted. He would sit there holding his breath for as much as a minute, and then puff it out with the labour of a man lifting a heavy piece of furniture upstairs. Sniff. Grunt. That animal grunt: that was their only conversation.

All these years trailing after children, all these years waiting for your husband to come home, all these years getting older—and then, when he did come, he didn’t speak! Not much of a life for a woman.

“As long as it keeps him happy,” the neighbour said. “I like a contented man.”

“By the pound, in a shop,” her husband said.

What began to alarm her was that this painting did not make him happy. Hear him! How he carried on, moaning and groaning! It was: “I can’t paint” or “It’s all wrong.” Or he got stuck and painted it all out (that was waste for you) and started again. “Well,” she told him, “if I couldn’t do a thing, I’d give it up, not make myself miserable. I mean, what’s the use of giving yourself the pip?”

He grunted.

“You say all your life you wanted to paint, if only you could paint you’d be happy,” she said. “You said I stopped you when we were married.” She sniffed.

“I didn’t say that,” he said with astonishment. She had got a reply from him at last!

“It’s what you meant,” she said.

He put his brush sideways in his mouth; the brush looked like a moustache there; he gazed at her.

“Well, look at you,” she said. “It makes you miserable and me

miserable and the children." (That was untrue: the children loved him to paint. She could not forgive them that.) "You don't think of us. It's turned you selfish. Always breathing that stuff into your system. It's poisoning you."

He put the brush down and started explaining to her about the picture. She was not listening; she was riding her wrongs, galloping away on them; but all the same, the words that caught her ear. Persp—what was it?—Chiaro—how d'you do? His eyes got larger and larger, astonished by the difficulty he had in trying to say what was in his mind.

"You're too trustful of people, showing that picture to Mr Frederick. He'll genius you out of the shop," she said.

"I'd be free then," he said. "An artist can't work without time and freedom. I was sort of free in the Army," he said.

"Free of me," she said.

"No, free," he said, "for the first time in my life. That's what made me start."

"Give up the shop!" she cried out.

"That's what I want to do," he said. "I give up the shop or give up my work."

"Your work!" she said. "Are you crazy or what? Here," she said in a panic. "You're kidding yourself. You're not an artist. Not a real artist."

She waited for his answer, anxiously fixing her look upon him. He waited a long time before answering. He seemed to be clambering over obstacles, puffing and struggling to get to something that eluded him; he failed. For he replied:

"No."

"What?" she said to be sure of it.

"No," he said. "I'm not."

"Oh!" she said. And then her argument died on her tongue. If he had said "Yes," she could have had it out with him then and there. He had always been a boaster—"Look what I've done," like a child. But his "No" shocked her. It was spoken in such a cold voice out of a frozen, obdurate, empty desolation. He might have been a marooned man, someone who had been put off alone on an ugly island. She felt an emotion that was half pity and half rage at this denial of himself. It was frightening to her, now, that he should agree with her, and she said to soothe him after she had wounded him:

"Are you going to draw the woman next door? She asked you. You never offer to draw me."

"That old owl," he said. "You said you hated being drawn."

"You never asked me," she said. "Draw me—not my face."

"Like artists do," she said. "With nothing on."

"I'll let you," she said eagerly.

"Now," she said, when she had taken off her clothes and sat on a chair. "This is not to be an excuse. The children will be back soon."

He was shy and uncertain.

"A painter doesn't think like that," he said. "Move your arm back. He's thinking of the composition. He's thinking of beauty."

"You don't love me," she said. "Not like you used in the shop. You wanted to draw me then. Now any woman would do."

"I can't keep my arm like that all the time," she said.

"Just a moment, only a moment," he said.

It was terrible. The way his astonished eyes looked at her, how composed his astonishment was. The way he measured her, as though she was in some way wrong. Imagine what the neighbours would say. Suppose one of the children came in. He grunted as he drew.

"You have a hard life," he said, suddenly talking, talking for the first time as he drew. "Shut up with three children, always at the stove or at the sink. You don't have a chance. I often think," he said, "you never have a life, not to call it life."

Her lips straightened.

"Go on telling me," she said.

"You need a rest, a change," he said, measuring her shoulders with the pencil.

"You don't say," she said. "And who's going to give it me?"

And then she slowly came to see what it was that she hated about this painting of his. *He* had a life, a life she couldn't share, a secret life she could not enter. Wonderfully kind he sounded—wonderfully kind, just like a man who is being unfaithful to you. Telling her. Telling her to go and have a life of her own. She sat there, naked, ironical, muttering her thoughts. You thank your stars, she said (but not to him) I don't go after a life of my own. A woman's life is a man, a child, another person. If I had had a life of my own it wouldn't be you.

"Oh, don't move," he said.

If I had had a life of my own, as you have, it would be a man. She saw now clearly how it was with him: this painting was an infidelity. It was like another woman. She took a long breath. She smelled the sharp smell of the paint and she remembered what she had thought at once when she smelled it in the house: another woman was there. He was unfaithful to her.

She got up without warning and covered herself with a vest. It humiliated her to sit before him.

That is still the situation. Mr Frederick, the manager, has been to the house. He is a shy, hard-mouthed man with a narrow face and grey hair. Unmarried. He is the kind of man who has to have some power, and usually you see his kind standing for hours outside chicken-runs at the end of a garden, fancying he is the cock. You can see he's gone farther with this husband of hers; leads him round like a tame bear. The fool! The enemy! "Didn't I say he wished him no good?" He has bought one of her husband's pictures for £10.

"Your husband is a born artist," he says to her. "He needs time. He needs peace. He needs . . . He needs . . ."

She can see he is dropping hints to her. What have they been saying about her? She says nothing. She just hates Mr Frederick. And yet—she can't understand why she does this, why she should enslave herself to this new mistress of his—she tiptoes to his room at dinner-time with a tray; if he is working, she puts the tray down without a word, so as not to disturb him, and goes out. She asks no questions. She makes no difficulties. She keeps the children away. And then, one of the children begins to sniff, the next one sniffs, and the third one sniffs louder; she herself goes into the sitting-room and sniffs again, sniffing round the walls. Where is it? What has he done with it? Has he brought it down yet—the new picture?

The Scapegoat

THERE were long times when we were at peace and when the world left us alone. We could go down Earl Street and, although we did not like the place and it felt strange to us and the women stared down from the windows and a child here and there might call out a name after us, we just walked on thinking of something else. But we were always more at ease and more ourselves, even in the quietest times of truce, when we had turned the corner by the hop-warehouse and had got back into Terence Street, which was our own. The truth is that you can't live without enemies, and the best enemies are the ones nearest home; and though we sometimes went out to the Green to boo the speakers and some of our lads went after the Yids or joined a procession up West, that was idleness and distraction. The people we hated were not a mile away on the main road where the trams and the buses are and you don't know one man from the next; no, the people we hated were round the corner, next door, in Earl Street. They were, we used to say, a different class of people from ourselves altogether.

I don't know why, but if there was any trouble in the world, we turned out and attacked them. I don't know either how these things began. You would know there was trouble coming when you heard the voices of the children getting shriller and more excited, until their cries became rhythmic like the pulse of native war-cries in the forest. We were, indeed, lost in a *jungle* of streets. Somehow the children would have sticks, old pieces of board and stones in their hands, and they would be rushing in groups to the hop-warehouse and jeering and then scattering back. A similar thing would be happening in Earl Street. Usually this happened in the warm long evenings of the summer. Then, after the children, the thing got hold of the women and they came down from their windows where they had been watching and scratching their arms, very hot and restless, and would stand at their doorsteps and start shouting at their children. A stone would fly up and then the women would be down in the middle of the street.

It might take a day to work up or it might take longer. You would get the Earl Street girls going down our street talking in loud voices daring us, and our young lads would stand by saying nothing until the girls got to the corner. And then those girls would have to bolt. Towards closing time the Gurneys, the fighting family in Earl Street, would be out and we had our Blackers and then it was a question of who came out of the Freemasons and how he came out. But perhaps nothing would happen and we would just go down Earl Street after dark and merely kick their milk-bottles down the basements.

This has been going on ever since the old people can remember. When the war came we knew everyone in Earl Street was a spy or a Hun or a Conchie. The Great War, for us, was between Earl Street and Terence Street. They had a V.C. and we hadn't, though we had a bunch of other stuff and one man who escaped from the Turks and was in the papers; and, though we did our best, the tea we gave was nothing to the tea they did in Earl Street for their V.C. Where they got the money from was the puzzle. Thirty-two pounds. Some of our women said the Earl Street girls must have been on the streets; and at the Freemasons the men said half of Earl Street were nothing but bloody pensioners. The police came in before we had the question settled. But when the war ended, things changed. Half of our lot was out of work and when we went down Earl Street we would see half of their lot out of work too, and Earl Street did not seem quite so strange to us. One street seemed to blend into the other. This made some of our lot think and they gave their steps an extra clean to show there was a difference between Earl Street and Terence Street after all.

In the years that followed, sometimes we were up on Earl Street, sometimes we were down. We were waiting for some big event. It did not come for a long time and a stranger might have thought that the old frontiers had gone and the reign of universal peace was upon us. It was not. The Jubilee came and we saw our chance. Earl Street had collected thirty-two pounds for its V.C.'s tea-party. We reckoned we would top that for the Jubilee. We would collect forty.

There was a red-haired Jew in our street called Lupinsky. He was a tailor. He was round-shouldered from bending over the table and his eyes were weak from working by gas at night. In

the rush season he and his family would be up past midnight working. He was a keen man. He came out in pimples—he was so keen. Lupinsky saw everything before any of us. He saw the Jubilee before the King himself. He had got his house full of bunting and streamers and Union Jacks. “Get in at the early doors,” he said. “What’ll you have?” he used to say to us when we went to his shop. “Rule Britannia or God Save the King?” “Who’s that?” we said. “The King of the Jews?” “Getcha,” said Lupinsky, “He’s dead. Didn’t you hear?” He raked in the money. They had another Jew in Earl Street doing the same. “I say!” called Lupinsky. “I say!”—we used to call him “I-say-what’ll-you-have”—“Cohen’s sold 120 yards to Earl Street and you’ve only done 70.” So we doubled. “I say,” says Lupinsky. “I say. When you going to start collecting? They got ten quid in Earl Street and you haven’t started.”

And this was true. The trouble was we couldn’t agree upon who should collect. We had had a nasty experience with the Club a few years back. And then Lupinsky was hot for doing it himself. He’d got the bunting. He’d seen it coming. He’d even got boxes. He’d thought of everything. We had nothing against Lupinsky, but when we saw him raking in the money on his God Saves and Kiss-me-quicks and his flags of all the nations, we thought he was collecting enough as it was. He might mix up the two collections. “No,” we said to Lupinsky. “You’re doing your bit, we’ll do the rest.” “That’s O.K.,” Lupinsky said. He never bore resentment, he was too keen. “But I hear Earl Street’s up to twelve ten.” He wasn’t upset with us, but he couldn’t bear to see us shilly-shallying around while Earl Street walked away with it. “If you don’t trust me,” he said, “can’t you trust yourselves? I don’t know what’s happened to this street.” And he spat from the top of his doorstep into the gutter.

Lupinsky was wrong about us. We trust each other. There is not a man in Terence Street you cannot trust. In that nasty business we had with the Club, the man was not a Terence Street man. We could trust one another. But we were frightened. Forty pounds! We thought. That’s a big sum. We didn’t like the handling of it. There wasn’t one of us who had seen forty pounds in his life. The Blackers, a good fighting lot, were terrified. Albert Smith and his uncle were the most likely, but they said they were single and didn’t like the idea. And we, for some reason, thought

a single man wasn't right for the job. And the wives, the married ones, though eagerly wanting their husbands to do it, were so afraid the honour would go to someone else, that they said to give it to a married man was tempting Providence. Lupinsky went down the street almost in tears, saying Earl Street had touched seventeen ten.

Then suddenly we saw the right man had been staring us in the face all the time. He was not single and he was not married. He was a widower, made serious by death: Art Edwards. We chose Art Edwards, and he agreed.

Art Edwards was a man of forty-seven, and the moment he agreed we were proud of him. He was a grey-haired man, not very talkative and of middle height, very patient and looked you straight in the face. He lived with his sister, who looked after his two children, he had a fruit stall in the main road—he had been there for twenty years—and every Sunday he used to go alone with a bunch of flowers for his wife's grave at the cemetery. The women admired him very much for doing this. He never changed. His house was the neatest house in our street and he never seemed to get richer or poorer. He just went on the same.

He had been a widower a good long time, too, and some thought he ought to marry again. The women were curious about him and said you couldn't but respect a man who didn't take a second, and Art was held up as a model. This didn't prevent many of them running after him and spreading the rumour afterwards that his sister was a woman who wouldn't let a man call his soul his own. But the way Art mourned for the dead and kept faithful to The First, the ONE AND ONLY, as the women said, was striking. Some of the men said that being a model wasn't healthy and that if they had been in Art's shoes they would muck around on the quiet. They wondered why the hell he didn't, yet admired him for his restraint. Some of us couldn't have lived with temptation all those years without slipping up.

Art had put a black band on his sleeve when his wife died and had worn it ever since. But when he started collecting for the tea we had the feeling he had put off his mourning and had come alive again. We were pleased about this because, with his modest, retiring ways, we hardly knew him. "It will bring him out," we said. He came round with his little red book and his tin and we said, "What's it now, Art? How we doin'?" Art was slow at adding

up, but accurate. He told us. We made a big effort and we touched the ten-pound mark pretty soon.

This woke us up and made us feel good, but Lupinsky came round and said it wasn't any bloody good at all. They'd touched nineteen pounds in Earl Street. So one of the women said they'd help Art. He didn't want this, or his sister didn't. So she joined in, too, to keep the other women off him. They knocked at his door at all hours and stopped him in the street. And when she saw this his sister put on her best hat and coat and went round and stopped their men. The result was everyone was collecting and came round to Art and said:

"Here y'are, Art. One and eight," or

"Here y'are, Art, eight and six."

And two of the Blacker girls had a fight because one said the other wasn't collecting fair but was cheapening herself to get the money. For we touched seventeen and went on to twenty-one.

The night we passed Earl Street some of our girls went out and just walked down Earl Street telling them. They didn't like it. A crowd from Earl Street came round and called "Down with the Yids" outside Lupinsky's. Then Earl Street picked up and passed us again. We went round to Art and planked down more money. Art got out his book and he couldn't write it down fast enough.

"Where do you keep it, Art?" we said.

He showed us a box in the cupboard. It was a fine sight all that money. His sister said:

"Art's picked up a bit in the High Street." We looked at him as if he were a hero. "Slike business," he said. "You've got to go out for it."

We looked with wonder at him. We had chosen the right man. It was bringing him out. And he had ideas too. He got some of the kids to go out at night with tins.

We passed Earl Street and they passed us. Then we passed them again. It was ding-dong all the time. Lupinsky flew in and out with the latest like a wasp and stung us to more. Art Edwards, he said, had no life in him. After this, it became madness. People got out their savings.

There was a funny case at Harry Law's. He was a boozier, a big, heavy man, very particular in the house and very religious. Some nights when he was bad he used to beat his wife and we used to look down into their basement window wondering what

would be happening inside, for something usually was happening. There were often shouts and curses and screams coming from that room and then times, which made you uncomfortable, when everything was quiet. Harry Law was often out of a job. Mrs Law was a timid woman and everyone was sorry for her. She used to go up to the Freemasons and look through the door at him. She was a thin, round-shouldered woman, always anxious about her husband and sorry that he made a fool of himself, for he got pompous when he was drunk and she hated the way people laughed at him. He used to say she had no ambition and he had dragged her out of the gutter. She said, "*Down* into the gutter, you mean." They used to have guilty arguments like this for hours, each boasting they were better than the other and wondering all the time why they had got into their present situation. Then Harry Law would go to church so as to feel good and find out why, and his wife used to stop at home and think about it too. She would put her arms round him and love him when he came back. And he would be all right for a few days until he got some scheme into his head for making money. When he had the scheme he would go out and get drunk again.

Harry Law wanted to show everyone that he was a man of ideas and ambitions, and better than the rest of us in Terence Street. He used to dress up on Sundays. He used to say he had been better off once and had had a shop. The truth was, as his wife bitterly told everyone, he'd always been the same; up and down all his life. She couldn't bear other people laughing at him, but she used to tear his reputation to bits herself and get great pleasure out of doing it.

It was just at the height of our madness that he came into the Freemasons and, instead of cadging for drinks, began to order freely. A funny thing had happened, he said. And he said, in his lordly voice, "I want Art Edwards." It turned out that he had been going across the room while his wife was out and had tripped up on something on the floor. There was a bump in the lino. Being a very inquisitive man who never had anything to do, he knelt down and felt the lump. "I thought it was dirt," he said. One of the things he always said about his wife was that she was dirty. He was a very clean man himself. He decided to take up the lino, and underneath he found a lump of money wrapped up in notes. It was his wife's savings.

That was why Harry Law was lording it at the Freemasons. He had hardly given a penny to the Collection, but now, when everyone was present, he was going to make a great gesture and show his greatness. When Art came in, he said, "Here, Art. Have a fiver."

We all stared. Harry Law was leaning against the bar with the notes in the tips of his fingers as if they were dirt, like a duke giving a tip.

At that moment his wife came in.

"That's mine," she screamed. "It's mine."

There was a row and Art wouldn't take the money. Everyone said that a man hadn't the right to take his wife's money. But Harry said, "What!" Wasn't his money as good as anybody's? and we said, "Yes, Harry, but that belongs to your missus." She was crying, and he kept saying, "Go home. I'll teach you to come round here. It is my money. I earned it."

This was awkward. Between her tears, with her hands covering her face, Mrs Law was saying she had saved it. He was always ruining them, so she had to save. Still, if he'd earned it, it was his.

"Take that money," said Harry, dropping it like a lord on the floor. The notes fell down, we all looked at them and no one moved. Mr Bell of the Freemasons got a laugh by saying we were littering up his bar with paper. Then Harry turned his back and we picked it up and were going to give it to Mrs Law, but Harry said in a threatening voice, "That's Art's. For the Collection. I reckon I got Earl Street knocked silly."

That part of the statement was irresistible. While we hesitated, Art said:

"Give it here then. I'll look after it." Lupinsky, who had been sitting there all the time clutching his hands and his eyes starting out of his head with misery at the sight of money lying in the sand, gave a shout.

"That's the boy," he said. "We've got 'em."

We all felt uncomfortable with Harry and we went away in ones and twos and Mrs Law went out still crying. After she went out Art went too, and when we got down the street Art stopped and told Mrs Law he wasn't going to take the money and he made her take it back. She clutched it with both hands and looked at him like a dog with gratitude.

That night half the men in Terence Street wanted to take up

their lino and sat up late arguing with their wives; but the madness was still in the air, especially when Earl Street, hearing our news, sent all their kids up West and passed us. There was a fight in the High Street between our kids and the Earl Street kids and one of ours lost her box. But there was nothing in it except stones. They put stones in to make a rattle so that people would think they were doing well. If there had been any money in that box there wouldn't have been a pane of glass in Earl Street left.

"They've passed us," the cry went down our street. In the middle of this Mrs Law came over to Art and gave him back the money. She made him take it.

"Your husband made you," says Art.

"Him," she said scornfully. "He don't know anything about it. I told him you gave it me back and he said, 'A good thing too.' He's feeling sorry for himself. I'll teach him to touch my money, I said. If there's going to be any giving in this house, it's me that's got the money. I'm going to teach my husband a lesson," she said.

This surprised Art, for he had been very sorry for poor Mrs Law, and had shown it. But I've no doubt she was tired of being pitied. That money was all she had. She was going to show us that the Laws had their pride and she wasn't going to let them down. Only *she* was going to give it.

Her eyes shone and were sharp. They were greenish, miserly grey eyes, yet she was not miserly. Now she was proud and not bedraggled with tears and misery, she looked jubilant and cunning. She had been a gay, quick-tongued woman in her time.

"I kept it under the floor. That was wrong of me," she said. "I oughter have put it in the Post Office."

She said she knew her husband was right. It was not right to hide money.

Everyone in Terence Street had supposed Mrs Law to be a poor, timid, beaten soul, and Art had always thought the same, he said; but now he said that she had some spirit. She had opened her heart to him because he had been kind to her and now she said, very proudly, that he should come and have a chat with her husband. She took Art triumphantly to her basement just to show her husband there were other men in the world. Old Harry Law saw this at once—he was always on his dignity—so he just talked largely to Art about the shops he had had, the ups and

downs, his financial adventures. Investments, he called them. We had all heard of investments, but none of us had ever had any. If he had his life over again, Harry Law said, he'd invest every penny.

"There's a man," Art said when he went, "who doesn't practise what he preaches." But he respected Harry's preaching, though he despised him a bit. And Harry said, "There's a man who stays the same all his life. Never made a penny, never lost a penny. The only money he's got," said Harry, "isn't his—this collection."

And Harry asked him how much it was. There were some thirty-odd pounds, Art said.

Harry respected him when he heard that and said with a sigh, "Money makes money."

When Art got back, his sister was short with him. "Going after other men's wives," she said. And she lectured him about Mrs Law. It had been such a warm, pleasant, friendly evening over at Harry Law's that Art was hurt about this.

"Him and her," he said, "has got more brains than you think. They've lived, all right. They've had their ups and downs."

"He's a boozier."

"We've all got our faults. He's had his ups and downs."

And that was the phrase that he kept repeating. It fascinated him. He felt generous. It came to him that he had never felt anything for years. He had just gone on standing in the High Street by the stall. He had never taken a holiday. He had never bought himself anything he wanted. He had never done anything. It startled him—but he suddenly did not want his wife who was in the grave. The street had chosen him, singled him out above all others, and there he stood naked, nothing. He was shy about his nonentity. He felt a curious longing for ups and downs.

You will say, "How did we know what Art Edwards thought?" That was the strange thing: we did know. We knew as if he had told us, as if we were inside him. You see, because we had singled him out he was, in a sense, ourselves. We could see him thinking and feeling and doing what we would. He had taken the burden off us. By doing that he had become nearer and more precious to us than any other person.

And there was Terence Street two pounds ahead of Earl Street, drunk with the excitement of it. Art used to get out the money

and count it—it was the biggest sum of money he had ever seen—and a sober pride filled him. He had done this. People like Mrs Law had just thrown in all they had. He had put in his bit cautiously, but everyone had scraped and strained and just wildly thrown in the cash. It made him marvel. He marvelled at us, he marvelled—as his hands trembled over the money—that he had been picked out by us to hold it.

We went round once or twice to look at the money too. What a nest egg, what an investment! Over thirty pounds! We said we wished it was ours. We said we wished we could give more, or double it. We all wanted to double it. We looked at it sadly. "If that thirty pounds had been on the winner to-day," someone said. "Or on the dogs."

We laughed uneasily. And we dreamed. The more we looked at that money the more we thought of things you could do with it—mad things like backing a horse or sensible things like starting a business or having a holiday.

When we got up in Art's kitchen and saw him put the money in the cupboard and lock the door, we nodded our heads sadly. It was like burying the dead.

"It's sad it's got to go," we thought.

And it seemed to us fitting that Art, who had buried the dead and who was a dour man with iron-grey hair and level-looking eyes, should have the grim task of keeping that money, like some sexton. And we were glad to have him doing it, to have him be responsible instead of us. For some of us had to admit we'd go mad at times with temptation tingling in our fingers and hissing like gas in coal in our hearts.

When we left him we felt a kind of sorrow for Art for bearing our burden, for being the custodian of our victory over Earl Street.

It made us all very friendly to Art. The time went by. We used to stop and have a word with him in the street. And Art became friendly too. But he wasn't at the Freemasons much. He went over to Mrs Law's. And Harry Law didn't go on the booze. He stayed at home talking largely to Art. Once or twice Art went out in the evenings with Mr and Mrs Law. Lupinsky used to see them up at the Pictures.

Lupinsky was our reporter of everything, and gradually, expressing no doubt the instinct of the street, he had become our

reporter on Art Edwards. We wanted a friendly eye kept on him not because he was valuable but because he was—well, as you would keep an eye on a sick man, say, a man who might have a heart attack or go dizzy in the street. When Lupinsky came back and said, "I see Art Edwards getting on a tram," we used to look up sharply and then, annoyed with ourselves, say, "What of it? What was he doing, having a ride?"

That Jew used to make us tired. And he'd started worrying already about the catering. They'd started arranging about the catering already in Earl Street. "It's a funny thing," we said, "about the Yids. He's only been here fifteen years and you'd think he'd been here for ever. Anyone'd think he'd been born in the street. You'd bloody well think it was Jerusalem."

We had been born there, most of us, and we said:

"It *will* be Jerusalem soon."

But we would have been nowhere without Lupinsky.

And then one morning he came along and said:

"Seen Art?"

"No," we said.

"He's not up in the High Street," said Lupinsky. "And he's not at his house."

"What of it?" we said.

Lupinsky was breathless. All the pimples on his face seemed about to burst. He had the kind of red hair that is coarse and stands up on end and thick arched eyebrows which were raised very high but were now higher for his eyes were starting out of his head. There were always bits of cotton from tailoring on his clothes and he was, as I have said, rather hump-backed from leaning all day over his machine.

"I saw him last night at the station. Nine o'clock. He took a ticket on the North London and hasn't been back."

"Smart baby," we said. But we were thinking of Lupinsky. We didn't believe him and yet we did believe him. "What were you doing up at the station—brother had another fire?" we said. Lupinsky's brother was always having fires.

But it was true. Art hadn't been home that night and his sister was very shifty when we went to see her. We never liked Art's sister and we grinned to think he'd got away from her for a night.

"Art had to go away on business," she said.

Theirs was a tidy house and Art's sister worked hard in it.

The window-sills were hearth-stoned. That woman never stopped. She always came to the door with an iron in her hand or a scrubbing-brush or with something she was cleaning or cooking. She was a tall, straight-nosed woman and she had the best teeth I've ever seen, but there was no thickness in her, no give.

She used to say, "I've never had justice done me."

And Art used to sigh and say, "I can never do justice to her."

"What about it now?" said Lupinsky, who was waiting for us.

"Art can go away if he likes," we said. "Why not?"

"Sure, yes, why not?" said Lupinsky. "What you worrying about?"

Later on Lupinsky came and told us Art was still away. His stall was still in the lock-up and he hadn't been down to the market. Lupinsky had a friend who had told him. Then Lupinsky had another friend who said he'd seen Art at Wembley.

"Too many Yids here," said Albert Blacker. "You can't move but you catch one in your clothes. What's up with Wembley?"

We went over to Mrs Law's and called down to her. She was ironing in the light of the window.

"Seen Art Edwards?" we said.

"No," she said. "He hasn't been here for two or three days."

"Oh," we said.

Then Harry Law got up from his chair by the stove and said:

"Art gone?"

"We're just looking for him. Thought he might be with you?"

Mrs Law gazed at us and then she looked at her husband. She was one of those women who when anything serious or unexpected happens, when they don't know what to think, when they are bewildered, always turn to their husbands; as if by studying him she would always know the worst about any event in the world and would be prepared. It was like looking up something in a book or gazing into a crystal. And when she had gazed at her husband and thought about him, she said:

"Oh dear." And she put down her iron and her shoulders hunched up. She looked accusingly at her husband and he lowered his eyes. He knew she could read him like that.

We did not think so at the time, but afterwards we said we had the feeling that when Mrs Law looked at her husband in that accusing way, she knew something about Art Edwards that we did not know. It turned out that she did not know. I looked out of

the window that night when I went to bed. It was a warm night. I work in a fur-warehouse and the air had the close, dead, laid-out smell of ladies' furs. There was a cold hollow lilac light over the roofs from the arc-lamps in the High Street. At night our street is quiet and often you can hear the moan of a ship's siren from the river like the hoarse voice of someone going away. But the commonest sound is the clinking of shunting trucks on the railway—a sound that is meaningless as if someone who couldn't play the piano had struck the keys anyhow, trying to make a tune. It is a sound which makes you think the city has had an attack of nerves. As I stood there on one leg, undoing my boots, I heard quick footsteps coming along. They were Lupinsky's. Lupinsky was always up late.

"I say. I say," he called up to me. "Art's come back. I just seen him. He came back and let himself in."

That night Art Edwards went into the lock-up in his yard and, attaching his braces to a hook in the roof, he hanged himself. The box in the cupboard was empty. He had gone off to Wembley and lost all the money on the dogs.

We went out into the street in the morning and stood outside the house and stared at the windows. The people from Earl Street came too. All the children came and stared and no one said anything in the street. Albert Blacker went into the yard at the back and Lupinsky was there with the police. Mrs Law would not leave her house, but stood on her doorstep holding the railing tightly, watching from a distance. Harry Law would not come out. He walked up and down the room and called up to his wife to come down. He could not bear being left alone. She was afraid to leave her house and yet, I thought, wanted to be with Art.

"The bloody twister," we said between our teeth.

"That bloody widower," we said.

"Takes our money and has a night out. Our savings! Our money!"

"The rotten thief."

We muttered like this standing in front of the house. We were sorry for the police who had to touch the body of a man like that.

"You wouldn't trust me," Lupinsky said.

We looked at him. We turned away. We couldn't bear the sight of that man's pimples.

"I'm used to money," Lupinsky said.

I could not repeat all the things we said. I remember clearly the red, white and blue streamers drooping over the street and looking dirty, with "God Save the King" on them. "God Save Art Edwards," said Harry Law, coming up. He was tight.

We thought of the spirit of Art Edwards's sister being humbled. All down the street, at all the windows, the women leaned on their bare arms thinking about this. They cuffed their children and the children cried. There was the low murmur of our voices in the street and then the whining voices of children. Presently a couple of women came down, pushed their way through the crowd and went in to help Art's sister. We gaped at them.

And then Lupinsky, who gave the lead to everything and always knew what we were thinking underneath, said:

"They're jeering at us in Earl Street."

They were. We set our teeth. Kids came round shouting, "Who swiped the money box! Who swiped the money box!" Our kids did nothing for a long time. Then they couldn't stand it. Our kids went for the Earl Street kids. Some of our women came down to pull their kids off and this drew out the Earl Street women. In half an hour Albert Blacker came out of the Freemasons with his sleeves rolled up, just when the Earl Street men were getting together, and then Harry Law came out roaring. Mrs Law ran towards him. But it was too late. A stone went and a window crashed and that brought out the rest of the Blacker family. We got it off our chests that night and we crowded into Earl Street. Half their milk-bottles had gone before the police whistles went.

And then it was clear to us. We knew what to do. Lupinsky headed it. Art Edwards was suddenly our hero. We'd kill the man who said anything against Art Edwards. In our hearts we said, it might have been ourselves. Thirty pounds. We remembered the sight of it! We even listened to Harry Law.

"He was trying to double it at the dogs," he said. "Investing it. Every man has . . ."

His wife pulled his coat and tried to stop him.

"Every man," continued Harry Law, "has his ups and downs."

And to show Earl Street what we were and to show the world what we thought of Art Edwards, we got up the biggest funeral that has ever been seen in our street. He was ourselves, our hero,

our god. He had borne our sins. You couldn't see the hearse for flowers. The street was black with people. The sun shone. We'd been round and got every stall-holder, every barrow-man in the neighbourhood. That procession was a mile long when it got going. There was a Jubilee for you, covered in red, white and blue wreaths. Art Edwards our king. It looked like a wedding. The great white trumpets of the lilies rocked thick on the coffin. Earl Street couldn't touch that. And Lupinsky collected the money.

The Lion's Den

"OH, there you are, that's it, dear," said the mother, timidly clawing her son out of the darkness of the doorway and kissing him. "You got here all right. I couldn't look out for you; they've boarded up the window. We've had a land-mine. All the glass went last week. Have you had your tea? Have a cup of tea?"

"Well, let's see the boy," said the father. "Come in here to the light."

"I've had tea, thanks," Teddy said.

"Have another cup. It won't take a tick. I'll pop the kettle on. . . ."

"Leave the boy alone, old dear," the father said. "He's had his tea. Your mother's just the same, Teddy."

"I only thought he'd like a cup of tea. He must be tired," said the mother.

"Sit down, do, there's a good girl," said the father.

"Now—can Father speak? Thank you. Would you like to wash your hands, old chap?" the father said. "We've got the hot water back, you know."

"Yes, go on," said the mother, "wash your hands. They did the water yesterday."

"There she goes again," the father said. "Wonderful, isn't it?"

"No, I don't want to wash," said Teddy.

"He doesn't want to wash his hands," said the father, "so leave him alone."

"It's hot if he wants to."

"We know it's hot," said the father. "Well, my boy, sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"Take this chair. Don't have that one. It's a horrible old thing. Here, take this one," the mother said.

"He's all right. He's got a chair," the father said.

"Let him sit where he likes," the mother said. "You do like that chair, Teddy, don't you?"

"Well," said Teddy, "you're looking well, Mother." This was not true; the mother looked ill. Her shoulders were hunched, her knees were bent and her legs bowed stiffly as she walked.

When she smiled, tears ran to the corners of her eyes as if age were splitting them; and dirty shadows like fingermarks gave them the misplaced stare of anxiety. Her fingers, too, were twisting and untwisting the corners of her cardigan.

"Of course she's looking well. Nothing wrong with her, is there? What I keep saying," the father said.

He was a bit of a joker. He resembled a doll-like colonel from a magazine cover, but too easy in manner for that.

"I'm well now," said the mother. "It's just these old raids. They upset me, but I get over it."

"We worry about you," Teddy said.

"You shouldn't worry," said the father. "There's nothing to worry about, really. We're here, that's the chief point. We just don't worry at all."

"It doesn't do any good, Teddy dear," said the mother. She was sitting by the fire and she leaned over to him and gripped his knee hard. "We've had our life. I'm seventy, don't forget."

"Seventy," laughed his father. "She can't forget she's seventy. She doesn't look it."

"But I am," said his mother fiercely.

"Age is what you make it," the father said. "That's how I feel."

"There's a lot in that," said the son.

"I go to bed . . . and I lie there listening," the mother said. "I just wait for it to go. Your father, of course, he goes to sleep at once. He's tired. He has a heavy day. But I listen and listen," the mother said, "and when it goes I give him a shake and say 'It's gone.'"

"I don't want to sound immodest," the father laughed, "but she nearly has my—my confounded pyjamas off me sometimes."

"He just lies there. He'd sleep through it, guns and all," the mother went on. "But I couldn't do that. I sit on the edge of the bed. If it's bad I sit on the top of the stairs."

"We both do if it's bad," the father said. "I get up if it's bad."

"You ought to sit under the staircase, not on top," said Teddy.

"Just in case," said the mother. "I like to feel I can get out."

"You see, you want to get out," the father said. "It isn't that one's afraid, but—well—you feel more comfortable."

"I sit there and I know it's wrong of me, I think of you all, if I'll ever see any of you again. I wish you were with me. I never see you all, not together like we used to be. . . ."

"It is natural for a mother to feel like that," said the father.

"I mean, if we could be not so far apart."

"We wish you'd come down to us," Teddy said.

"I wish I could, dear," said the mother.

"Why don't you? You could, easily."

"I'd like to, but I can't."

"I don't see why not. Why don't you send her, Dad? Just for the rest."

"I've got to stay with Dad," she said.

"Your mother feels she's got to stay with me."

"But," Teddy said, "you could look after yourself for a while."

"I could look after myself all right," said the father. "Don't you worry about that."

"Well," said Teddy, "what's against it?"

"Nothing's against it," said his father. "Just herself. She feels her place is here. She just feels this is her place."

His father raised his chin and lowered his eyes bashfully. He had a small white moustache as slight as a monkey's, and it seemed to give a twist to the meaning of his words, putting them between sets of inverted commas.

The mother read his eyes slowly and fidgeted on her stool by the fire. She nodded from habit when she had got through her husband's words, but she glanced furtively at her son. She put on an air of light-heartedness, to close the subject.

"Some day I'll come," she said. "The Miss Andersons are very kind. They had us down last Sunday when the windows went. . . . It's safer downstairs."

"You know what I feel?" said his father, in a sprightly way.

"I feel it's safe everywhere."

The son and the mother both looked at the father with very startled concern and sympathy, recognizing that in danger everyone lives by his own foible. Then guiltily they glanced at each other.

"I feel it," said the father apologetically, when he saw their expression.

"I know it," he asserted, feebly scowling. Seeing he had embarrassed them, he escaped into a business-like mood. "Now I'm going down to see about the coal for the morning. I always do it at this time."

"He's wonderful," said the mother. "He always does the coal."

When the father left the room, a great change came over the mother and son.

"Come nearer the fire, dear," said the mother. They were together. They came closer together like lovers.

"Just a minute, dear," she said. And she went to the curtains and peeped into the night. Then she came back to the stool.

"You see how it is, dear," she said. "He has faith." The son scowled.

"It's wonderful, his faith," she said. "He trusts in God."

A look of anger set on the son's jaw for a moment, then he wagged his head resignedly.

"He always did. You remember, when you were a boy?" said the mother, humouring her son. "I never could. He did from the beginning when I met him. Mind you, Teddy, I don't say it's a bad thing. It's got him on. When one of those old things starts he goes to his room and he prays. I know he's praying. Really he's praying all the time, for me, for you children . . ."

"For us!" exclaimed the son.

"Yes, for everyone," said the mother. "The world—oh, I don't understand. If there's a God, why did He let it happen in the first place?—but your father, he always did do things on a big scale."

She was speaking in a whisper and glancing now and then at the door.

"Too big," she murmured.

"If there is a God," said the son, "He is pitiable, weak, small. Hardly born . . ."

He checked himself when he saw that his mother looked at him without comprehension. "I am old," she shivered and he saw the tears cracking in her eyes. "I used to live in hope—you know, for the future. You know, hope things would go right, hoping things for you children, but now I haven't even got hope." She looked wildly. "It's gone."

She stared over his shoulder to the walls of the room and the heavy curtains.

"It isn't this old war and these old raids," she said. "Life's gone, it's gone too quickly. There's nothing, Ted, that's how it seems to me, except if we could just be together as we were."

"Don't cry, Mother."

"No, mustn't cry, mustn't let him see I cried. Women do cry."

It's silly. What shall we talk about? Let's think of something else."

She became sly and detached like a young girl running away, daring him to catch her. He knew these changes of mood in his mother very well. She began to talk in a bold taunting way.

"It's the house," she said scornfully. "He doesn't like the house to be left. Someone must be in the house. It won't run away, I tell him. Good thing if it was bombed. But his mother was just the same, cling on, cling on, scrubbing, polishing. 'You can't take it with you,' I used to say to her. She used to give me a look. 'Eh,' she said, 'you want me to die.' I can see her now. 'You wicked woman,' I said. And when they carried her out, the men bumped the coffin, dear, on the chest of drawers and I thought, 'If you could see that scratch!' Some call it faith. I call it property. Property."

His mother's eyes became sly and malicious. She laughed.

"Oh, there are things I could tell you," she cried recklessly, looking at the door. "When it starts and I hear the guns, I think of you. Things you don't know about, you were just a baby at the time. No one knows them. It's my life. All those years. Can you hear him? Is he coming upstairs?"

"No, I don't hear him."

"No, he'll be another minute or two. Quick, I'll show you something. Come along."

She got up and seizing her son's sleeve she nearly ran with him from the room.

"You're not to say anything," she said.

"His bedroom," she said. "Look at it."

It was simply a bedroom with too much furniture in it.

"Three chests of drawers," the son said. "What does he want with three?"

A look of wicked delight came into his mother's face, a look so merry that he knew he was saying what she wanted him to say.

"Two wardrobes," he exclaimed.

"Three with this!" exclaimed his mother, touching a cupboard in the corner, as if she were selling it.

"And then—just in case you want to read," his mother said satirically. She pointed one by one to several reading-lamps by the bed, on the chests, on the dressing-table.

"What's he want five for?" said the son.

"Shave?" said his mother excitedly, opening a heavy drawer. Inside was a number of razors and shaving things of all kind. She bent to the drawer below.

"Locked," she said. Undismayed, she led him to the far wall. "Count," she said. The son began to count. At seventeen he stopped. There were many more than seventeen pairs of boots lined up, and at the end the son stopped with astonishment.

"Riding-boots. When does he ride?"

"He's never ridden in his life, my dear."

"Waders, climbing-boots . . ." the son began to laugh. "He never fished, did he?"

"When did he buy all this gear?"

"Oh, we haven't begun, dear. Look at this."

One by one she opened the wardrobes swiftly, allowed her son to glance, even to touch for a moment, and then swiftly closed the door. She showed him some thirty suits of clothes and more hats than he could count.

"I'll try one on," said the son, laughing.

"No," said the mother, "he'd know you'd touched them."

"What's the idea of this hoard? It's madness," he said.

The word madness came to his head because, at this triumph of her secret-telling, she looked mad herself. Her eyes stared with all the malice of the mad, intent on their message. Then quickly as a mouse she scurried to the door and listened.

The son stood by the fireplace when she went to the door and looked at a picture over the mantelpiece. It was the only picture in the room. It was a picture of a tall, bareheaded, austere man in ancient robes, standing in the shadows of a crowded place, alone. And in those shadows crouched a prowling group of lions, their surly faces barred with scowls of anger and fear.

"Daniel in the Lion's Den. He loves old Daniel," said his mother, coming up behind him. "He's always talking of Daniel."

The son gaped at the picture. The room was filled with his father's life, but this picture seemed to be more profoundly his father's life than anything in the room. He suddenly felt ashamed of being in his father's room.

"Let's go back to the fire," the son said.

"Look, dear," the mother was pulling at his sleeve. "Something else, quick."

She took him to a chest of drawers and opened the drawers one by one.

"Pants," she said in her deceptive voice, and as she spoke she carefully lifted one or two of the garments. Underneath them was a silver cruet.

"Solid silver," she said. "Wait. Two dozen teaspoons. A set of fish-knives. All silver."

"Come along, Mother. I know, I know."

"Silver tea-tray. Kettle," she was at another drawer, ignoring him.

"Fish-knives, spoons, ink-stands . . ."

"Mother, stop . . ."

"You move this. It's heavy. Look at this one. Shirts." She was lifting the shirts and revealing under them a cache of silver cream-jugs, hot-water jugs . . .

"Oh dear," said his mother. "We never use them. We never see them. He thinks I don't know. He just comes home and goes straight to his bedroom and slips them in."

"Where does he pick up all this?" said the son.

"Ask no questions, hear no lies," said his mother.

"No, seriously, what's the idea?"

The old lady's face was marked suddenly by all the bewilderment of a lifetime. She was helpless.

"Don't ask me, dear," she said. "It's him. It's how he's always been."

She looked at her son, exhausted and enquiring. She had suddenly lost interest. She was also frightened.

"Come out, in case he comes. You see, dear, how it is. We couldn't leave all that."

She turned out the lights and they walked back into the sitting-room.

"You're looking tired, dear," she said, in an unnatural voice, making conversation. "Do you sleep well?"

She went over to the curtains again and peeped out as she said this.

"Pretty well."

She came back to the fire.

"I know. You dream. Do you dream? I dream something chronic. Every night. Your father doesn't dream, of course. He just sleeps. He's always been like that. Sometimes I have a

terrible dream. I dream, dear, that I'm in a palace, a king's palace, something like Windsor Castle, and I go into a great hall and it's filled with—treasure: well, things, beautiful—you know, armour, pictures, china, and I stand there and I can't get my breath and I say, 'Oh, I must get out.' And I go out of a door just to get air to breathe. . . ."

"Indigestion," said her son.

"Is it? Well, through this door there's another room, just the same, but it's filled with commoner things—crockery, iron-mongery, furniture—just like a second-hand shop, but thousands, dear, and I think, 'Oh, let me breathe,' and I hurry out of it by the door, and beyond that door," said the mother, holding his hand, "is another room. Ted, it's full of everything decaying, filthy. Oh, it's horrible, dear. I wake up feeling sick."

"What is that?" asked the son, nodding to the ceiling. "Up there."

"On the ceiling?" she said. "Oh, that's our crack. It's getting bigger," she said. "It's a bad one."

"That was the land-mine, dear, the one that broke the windows. The one that killed old Mrs Croft. . . ."

"I know, Mother, don't . . ."

"I thought we had gone and I said, 'Oh, Dad. We've gone.' Ted, dear, the dust!"

They looked at the ceiling. Beginning at the wall by the window, the crack was like a cut that has not closed.

"And perhaps it would have been a good thing if we had gone," she said, narrowing her eyes and searching her son's face with a look that terrified him. "We've had our life. What is your life? I watch that old crack and I say, 'Let's see. Are you getting larger?' But he sits there, quiet at his table, and says, 'Remember Daniel. There's nothing to be afraid of.' It's wonderful, really. He believes it. It does him good. There's just ourselves, dear, you see. You've all grown up, you've gone your own ways, you can't be here with me and it wouldn't be right if you could be. I always feel I've got you. I think to myself, I've got something, I've got you children. But he's got nothing. You mustn't take any notice of the things I say. I expect you know women just say things and don't know why they say them. . . . When I see him sitting there under the lamp, praying for me and you and all of us, I think, poor old Daddy, that's all he's got—his faith. But I've got him."

"Ssh, Mother, don't cry. He's coming now," the son said. Quickly she sat on the stool by the fire and put her head forward so that the disorder of her face should be hidden in the glow of the flame.

The father tapped his fingers comically on the panel of the door.

"May I come in? Sure I'm not interrupting? Thank you. Mother and son," he smiled, nodding his head. "The old, old story, mother and son."

A flush of annoyance and guilt passed over the son's body and came to his lips in a jaunty, uneasy laugh.

The father frowned.

"I say, old girl," he said. "I've just been outside. There was a chink of light showing in my room. We must be careful. . . ."

"I was just showing Ted round," said the mother.

"Showing me round the estate," Ted said.

"I've switched it off," the mother said.

"Switch it on, old girl. Let's have that tea." He settled himself innocently on the edge of his chair with his legs tucked under it, and his pleased fingers joined over his waistcoat.

"It's a good thing I know your mother. How old are you, my boy—forty? In forty-five years I've got to know her," the father smiled.

The old lady nodded her head as she went over his words, and then she got up from her stool to make the tea.

"I don't think they'll come to-night, dear," she said with spirit.

"I'm here," the son laughed.

"Run along, old girl. Of course they won't," the father said, ordering and defending his own. "I just *know* they won't."

Eleven O'Clock

FROM years of habit the mare stopped a minute or two at the right houses in all the streets waiting for the milkman's voice to call, "Good day, ma'am, thank you, ma'am," in the alleys. Then she gave a slouching heave, the cans and bottles would start jingling, and, with the man following, she was off to the next stop. But when eleven o'clock came she stopped dead. She knew the house they were at now. She knew it well. An ungainly, warty and piebald creature, she loosened her shoulders, her head and neck hung to the ground, her forelegs splayed out, and she looked old, rakish and cynical.

For here was no stop of a minute or two. Down the passage strode the milkman, his lips whistling. Five minutes passed into ten, ten into twenty. Some mornings it was half an hour, three-quarters or the full hour. And when the milkman came back he was not whistling.

He was a short, ruddy man in a brown dustcoat with the firm's name on it and a hat like a police inspector's. But there is nothing like a uniform for concealing the soul. He was bald and battered under his hat and his eyebrows were thick and inky. If he took his hat off in the middle of a sentence, that sentence would become suddenly very easy and rather free; if he wiped his bald head with his handkerchief, *that* was a sign he might get freer.

The first time the milkman went to the house a woman came across the kitchen towards him. The fire was murmuring in the range and a pot of coffee was standing on it. A tray of cakes had just been taken out of the oven and was standing on the table. The milkman's nostrils had small sensitive black hairs in them, and they quivered.

"Oh, I do like a nice mince-pie," said the milkman.

She was a kind woman. "The early bird catches the worm," she said. "Have one."

She was a big creature, lazy and soft in the arms and shoulders. She had several chins. The small chin shook like a cup in its saucer on the second chin that was under it, and she had freckles on her neck. She was warm and untidy with cooking, and her yellow

hair was coming undone at the back. Her mouth was short and surly, but now it softened in harmony with the rest of her into an easy placid smile; the rest of her body seemed to be laughing at her fatness, and the smile broadened from her lips to her neck and so on downwards, until the milkman put his foot on the doorstep, took off his hat and wiped his bald head with pleasure.

"I'm a rollin' stone, ma'am," said the milkman. "I don't mind if I do."

She turned round and walked slowly to the table and the cakes. They were small cherry cakes. When she turned, the crease in the back of her neck seemed to be a smile and even her shoes seemed to be making smiles of pleasure on the floor.

"Come in," she said. "I'm Yorkshire. I'm not like the people round here. I'm neighbourly."

"I'm Yorkshire. I'm neighbourly too," said the milkman, rubbing his hands, and he stepped in. It was warm and cosy in the kitchen, warm with the smell of the cakes and the coffee, and warm with the good-natured woman.

"Take a seat," said the woman. "I'm sitting down myself. I've been on my feet all morning. I come from Leeds and this is my bake."

"I come from Hull," said the milkman. "We never say 'no' and we never say die. I've been on my feet too. What I mean to say—in my job, you can't ride because you're always stopping and you can't stop because you've got to keep moving, if you get me." The milkman sat down opposite her.

"I could tell you were from the north," said the hospitable woman. She pushed the cakes towards him. "Go on," she said. "Take one. Take two. They're a mean lot of people down here. There's nothing mean about me."

"After you, ma'am," he said.

"No," she said. "I dassn't."

She laughed.

"Slimming?" said the milkman.

"Oh, ha ha," laughed the woman. "That's a good one. Look at me. I've got the spread. I don't get any exercise." She went into a new peal of laughter. "And I don't want it."

"We're as God made us," said the milkman. "All sizes."

"And all shapes," said the woman, recovering. "It wouldn't do for all of us to be thin."

"You want some heavyweights," said the man.

"They're all thin round here, and mean," said the woman.

The woman laughed until tears came into the small grey eyes which were sunk like oyster pearls between her plump fire-reddened cheeks and her almost hairless brows. She laughed and laughed, and her laughter was like her smile. She laughed not only with her mouth, but her cheeks gave a jump and her chins jumped together and her big breasts shook, and she spread her legs with laughter, too, under the table.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" she said. "When I was a girl I was in the catering business and they starved me. One house I was in the boss used to follow me into the kitchen when I was putting away the snacks to see I didn't pinch anything. And I can tell you it was a work of art slipping a bit of cheese down the neck of me blouse to eat when I got up to bed, it was."

The milkman looked at her blouse.

The milkman widened one eye and winked with the other.

"Oh, don't!" cried the woman, going off again. "Don't! Stop it! Don't start me off."

"Don't mind me," said the woman, wiping her eyes. "I've been here seven weeks and this is the first laugh I've had. My husband's a cripple. He's a watchmaker. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, all day long. He hangs up the watches on the wall and that's all I've heard for seven weeks! Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock."

She wiped the tears from her eyes with her apron and waved an arm to the wall.

There were four clocks on the kitchen wall and three on the mantelpiece, and there were watches hanging on nails. The tall brown clock with the pendulum gave a slow grating "Tock"; the blue alarm on the mantelpiece went at a run; the big wooden clock next to it made a sweet sound like a man sucking a pipe, and the rest croaked, scratched, ticked and chattered. Carved in fretwork was a small cuckoo clock beside the door.

"Who winds them?" asked the milkman with his mouth full of cake.

"Who winds them?" said the woman. "He winds them. He comes home and spends all night winding them. Have some coffee. You ought to see what I've got inside and upstairs."

"I bet," said the milkman, gazing at her from his still wide eyes. "If there's a drop of coffee I'll have it."

"Laugh," said the woman. "You can't tell night from day in this house. They all say something different. I've been seven weeks here, but it might be seven years. It's a good thing I can laugh."

"It's slimming," he said.

"It's spreading," she said.

"Well, I like a bit of spread myself," said the milkman.

The milkman watched her go to the range. He watched her bring the coffee-pot over and bring a couple of white cups from the dresser. He got up and went to the door.

"My Jenny," he said. "My mare. Whoa! Listen to her. She's kicking up the pavement."

The mare was kicking the kerb. She was standing with her forelegs on it, gazing down the alley and striking a hoof on the pavement.

"She knows I'm in here," he said, coming back. "I bet she knows I'm having a cup of coffee. I bet she's wondering what's happening. I bet she's thinking it out. Wonderful things horses are. Jealous, you know, too," he said. "If she knew you was in here, I'd never hear the last of it."

"Eating's her trouble. She's old," said the milkman. "She's terrible. I've never seen an animal eat what she does. I bet she knows there's something going on."

The milkman sipped his coffee. His lips made bubbling sounds as he drank. Soon there were no sounds in the room but the ticking of the clocks and the bubbling noise of the woman's lips and the man's lips at their cups, and a click of the cups and a murmur of laughter from the woman.

Then the little fretwork clock which hung by the door gave a small sneezing buzz, a door clipped open, a tiny hammer rang and out bobbed the bird. "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" it called, and "Clap" went the door. The milkman put down his cup with a start and gaped.

"They're all wrong," said the woman. "Sit down. Have another cake, just a little one. Have a tart? That cuckoo's never right. 'Oh, shut up,' I tell it. 'Keep quiet.'"

"I used to do fretwork myself," said the milkman.

"Sit down," she pressed him. "Another cup will warm you up."

"You're warm in here," said the milkman.

"I'm warm anywhere," the woman said.

"Don't want winding up, I bet," said the milkman with a wink. He was short beside her and he took a long easy look at her. He wiped his bald head and put on his hat.

"Well," he said. "Talking of time, one thing leads to another."

She looked at him sadly, and with a lazy yawn raised her big arms above her head.

"Come and see those clocks."

The milkman had his pencil in his ear, a small red stump of pencil. He took it out and, quickly, he gave her a soft poke in the waist with it and went off.

"Good day, ma'am, thank you, ma'am," he called, and went off whistling.

The next day the milk-cart stopped again at the house. Behind the cart the milkman walked, humming to himself. He looked up at the house. There was the short brick wall and the iron rail on top of it. There was the green hedge coming into leaf. He took his basket, he swung open the gate and he went down the alley. There was a smell of pastry just out of the oven. For a long time while he was gone the mare stood, then she stepped on to the kerb and began knocking her hoof upon it. The sound could be heard down the deserted road. "Whoa!" shouted the milkman down the alley. The mare stretched her neck and sniffed the ground and then began pawing again. She got both forefeet on the pavement and kept stretching and shaking her smooth white neck. "Whoa!" shouted the milkman's voice. She pricked her ears. He was shouting from the front room window.

Half an hour passed. The mare had now stepped farther on to the pavement. Her neck was stretched out to its full length. She was sniffing the wall, the iron rail, and behind it the juicy green shoots of the hedge. She strained, her nostrils trembling, her soft mouth opening to seize a shoot in her old yellow teeth. She paused and made a greater effort, pulling the cart, and now her nose was over the top of the railing. Grunting, chewing, slopping, crunching sounds came from her mouth. She had bitten off her first piece. And, once on it, appetite leapt. She gave a wilder tug and now she could get at the hedge. Her teeth dragged at the hedge and crunched. She raised her neck, looked with discrimination at the shoots, then went on quietly browsing.

No sounds came from the house, no sound from the road but the chewing of the horse, the bit chinking like marbles in her

slobber. Hearing him come at last, she backed on to the road. He came out very thoughtful and not whistling.

And some mornings there was the smell of cake in the alley, sometimes it was pie and sometimes it was coffee. Again a quarter of an hour passed, or maybe twenty minutes or half an hour, and often enough a full hour, and a shout of "Whoa!" came from an upstairs window. He had his coat off. "That clock's wrong," said the woman. "They're all wrong." The mare's neck was right over the railings and this was necessary because, as she chewed, the hedge got lower and lower.

"Eh, whoa there!" the milkman shouted down from the top floor of the house one morning and, looking in amazement at the torn and bitten green hedge and the mare still tearing it, he came down to the street.

"What's the idea? Come off it," he said, taking the mare by the bridle and jerking her head off the hedge.

He drew her off the pavement and went back and looked over the railings at the hedge, ruined by weeks of eating.

"Been getting your greens, haven't you?" he said. He stared at the mare and, bright under their blinkers, he saw the eyes of that cynical animal, secretive and glistening, gazing back at him.

Page and Monarch

TEN days before Christmas, Schneider went. His departures like his arrivals were orgiastic, and between them was a three-months orgy of work. All day between Schneider House and his suite at the hotel, the messengers, the secretaries, the managers, the legal and advertising men, went. Jewellers, picture dealers, stockbrokers, women, sailed up to his suite in the hushed warm lifts. There were nights in restaurants, theatres and night clubs. Telephone bells rang in Manchester, Paris, Rome and New York calling people to the eager guttural splutter of Schneider's voice. Up to the last moment he was working and playing at once, flopping like a sea-lion in his chair. A cigar was in his mouth, a bottle of champagne was on his desk, a pen was in his hand signing letters and contracts, while he talked to Lippott, who was behind him, his three secretaries, to people more remote in the blue haze of cigar smoke: and all the time into another telephone he was gurgling thick, sentimental nonsense to Lola in the bedroom next door, who was sitting like a cross bird of paradise at her dressing-table. He had been up till four the night before, dancing. And now, while the cars waited below and the heavy luggage was being loaded, he was rolling in his chair. His black hair curled over the astrakhan collar of his overcoat. The smiles that sent ripples into the bay of sallow baldness in the head seemed to flow from his voracious lips all over his body. His very arms smiled when he smiled, his whole body grunted when he grunted.

Then when all was done he and his court sailed down in the lifts and he walked out of the hotel to his car like a squat prince in horn-rimmed spectacles, still giving orders, shaking hands, bowed to by the manager and the staff; and two cars followed the Rolls with the luggage. Lippott, as was fitting in the man who was closer to Schneider than any man, knowing more than his mistresses, more than his directors, knowing more about his money, his clothes, his very underclothes, more about his tempers, his tricks, his swindles, his schemes—Lippott, who was as vital to him as the braces which held up his trousers—was the last to speak to him through the car window.

"And a merry Christmas!" Lippott said in a voice which was like the icing on a small cake.

"Vot's that, Lippott?"

"A merry Christmas. Compliments of the season."

Lippott, though he was stiff and clever with other people, wriggled like a confused girl when he spoke to Schneider.

"Oh, ha ha," came the roar of Schneider's laugh from the car.

"Merry compliments. No?"

Schneider had a lifelong difficulty with English greetings. And so, like a cat, the car went off, taking Schneider to Italy. Schneider House would not be disturbed for another two or three months.

After the departure of Schneider came the departure of Lippott: a liner is launched and after it comes an outboard, methodically chugging and drawn out with deceptive speed into the immense swell. Lippott went back with the manager into the hotel. The servants, who were left, bowed. In a more practical way there was a similar if smaller deference to Lippott. Lippott arranged about bills and tips. Lippott scrutinized, organized and paid. Lippott was Schneider's shadow. Schneider was a dream, a fantasy like an enormous electric sign on the front of a building; but Lippott, the exact man in the bowler-hat, the restrained expensive clothes, and the small culture-pearl laugh, was the reality. He was the Code Book. There was a deference to the man who paid in hundreds or in thousands on behalf of Schneider, and after he had received his deference he left. No car waited for him.

"Good day, Mr Lippott," from three, not ten servants, and a look from bowler brim to rubber-tipped heels after he passed.

Lippott walked. He walked because he was a frugal man and because he was a free man now Schneider had gone, and also because it took hours, after these launchings, for the swell of departure to die down. One was borne along and out with Schneider on a wave that rose and dived like a dolphin. Then at last the wave weakened and the pace lagged; gradually Schneider got away and Lippott was left bumping about in the wake of Schneider, to the long musing row back to familiar waters.

But the wave was not weakening yet and Schneider was, so to speak, in sight. Continually, as Lippott walked back to the office, as he sat drinking coffee and eating a sandwich there, as

lunch-time passed and the afternoon began, Lippott was seeing Schneider on the boat, the Schneider cabins, the Schneider lunch at Calais, the Schneider nights in Paris, the Schneider villas. (Lippott had done it all more than once with Schneider.) He was filled with Schneider. This was like being filled with Schneider's champagne. In this state of intoxication, Lippott could not settle to his work. He had never been able to work on the days when Schneider left.

"Oh, Miss Anderson" (Lippott was speaking into an instrument on his desk. His "Oh, Miss Anderson" always sounded like the restive appeal of a man being tickled), "I am going out," he said.

He put on his hat and coat and left the office.

"I am sorry there is no reply from the secretary's room," the operators said. "Schneiders. Schneiders," the voices chimed in the telephone exchange. "The secretary is out."

Lippott went down by the stairs. Now Schneider must be racing down the long march of poplars to Abbeville. The chalk dust would be fainter in the winter. If it were raining the cars would arrive white with mud in Paris. Lippott preferred the stairs to the lift because he liked no one to see what he was doing. Schneider was the voluptuary of lifts; on the stairs, the ascetic Lippott. He was the private, confidential man, the secretary of the company—the one who came round corners surprising people, noting who they are, pleased that they stop talking. They were afraid, in spite of their large Public School voices, of the busy Board School Lippott. Even the directors were cautious with the unobtrusive, omnipresent secretary with the shaky accent.

He went through the swing doors that seemed to flash messages of the wealth and cleverness of Schneider into the city. He went into the street. In the approaching dusk he was a short man who might have been mistaken for Schneider; but Lippott was lean, and, for the rest, no more than a sedate dark coat, smart dark trousers, a bowler-hat, a collar and a tie and pair of boots, with a face put in precisely the right place among them. He had tired, well-fed creases in the skin of his face, the London pallor.

If Lippott looked pleased as he walked past the shops, it was from no personal vanity. He had leisure because trade was slack and it was slack at Christmas because the shops had filled up with

Schneider materials in the late autumn. Now the crowds in the streets were looking at them in the shop-windows. Whenever he saw lights of shop-windows, he partook of the pleasure of being attached to the brilliance of Schneider.

The afternoon was closing. After the morning fog there had been a few hours of grey daylight over the roofs, and then at three the street lamps were lit and the lamps of cars and buses. The shops threw out weak fans of light from their windows. There was a hoarse evanescent tenderness in the air which makes many people think of the winters of their childhood, and they look into the shop-windows as they used in those days to look into the fire. There was the sound of thousands of footsteps, the sea-roar of engines. Many people were going home. The lights of the cars moved smoothly like pairs of cat's eyes out of the slowly sinking fog. As he crossed the side streets, Lippott would see the moist horn-coloured vapour, with its core of weak pink or lilac light where the arc-lamps hung. The corners of buildings were smudged and broken off in the upper air, and in the lower the fog was like a damp sand, the vapour of a million individual breaths. Gaiety was about, as if this too were the orgiastic wake of Schneider and the traffic were his music. Lippott stepped out. There was the restaurant where Schneider dined. There was the shop where Schneider had bought Lippott his Daimler. There Schneider bought his orchids, his wine, his cigars, his perfumes—the smell of the Schneider women—the street was rich and dazzling with the folly of Schneider.

Lippott had three thousand a year now, and his shares, and there were all those private speculations where, if Schneider had put down ten thousand, a hundred thousand or half a million, Lippott had followed with his occasional hundreds, a mouse nibbling where a rat had gnawed. He belonged to two clubs now, he had his clothes made at the tailors which Schneider had found too cheap ten years before. His signet ring was from Schneider and so was his cigarette-case. Schneider had bought him his house and given him his Daimler. Once—this was one of the earliest presents and Lippott had refused it because he had seen at once it might put sand into the oil of their intimacy—Schneider had offered him a mistress he was tired of. Women for Lippott were items of Schneider's accountancy: a new pair of eyes, a new account.

Lippott stopped beside the window of a piano shop. He had not been thinking of Schneider at all. He had been thinking of Lola, sitting beside him racing through the chalk dust of the road to Abbeville, the value of whose shoes he knew, the price of whose fur coat and diamonds he knew, the rent of whose villa he paid; and of her voice which was like the tinkling of wine-glasses. He had stopped.

The piano shop was graver than the other shops in the street and its lights were dimmer. In dull pools they were reflected on the level tops of the instruments. The shop was as solemn as an undertaker's and had the dreary luxury of a mausoleum. Chinese urns had indeed been placed in the windows and the ivory keyboards were like the long teeth of the dead. Lippott looked through the window and under the strong low light of an inner room he could see the grey, waved hair of a woman. Younger women stood idle at the counters. Lippott stood in the shadow watching her, and as he watched her he felt himself deeper in voice and growing in height and stoutness. He felt his hair curl at the back and his small hands grow thicker. The sensation grew as he approached the door. It was opened by a man with a chest of medals. Lippott, on the impulse, was Schneider. This was the woman Schneider had offered him. Schneider gone, he had come out to look at her.

"I want to speak to Mrs Cambery," he said. He lowered his dark eyelids as he said the name and then looked up and began whistling softly. Still he was Schneider. He saw her rise from her desk and come out to him, a tall woman taking small steps towards him, like a smile on stilts.

"It's a long time since you've been in here, Mr Lippott," she said in a high voice like the voice of Schneider's Lola, but an older and harder voice. "Have you come to wish me a happy Christmas? How nice of you." She looked down upon him, trying to guess his errand.

And he was Schneider no more. Of course he had not come to wish her a happy Christmas. He had taken off his hat and he could see his short straight black hair shining in the dreary gilded mirror which accentuated his leanness. His voice was the voice of the secretary of the company, being charming to a one-time client.

"I came in," he said, "to buy a gramophone."

He looked at her. She was taller than he. Like all the women in the shops in this part of London she was expensively dressed. She was a woman in her late forties and her grace had stiffened and quickened with an exaggerated animation, her beauty remaining in her long cold eyes.

Little Lippott, she thought. Money. Still with Schneider. Outlasted me with Schneider. What's he after?

"They are making some lovely things nowadays," she said, glancing at him, to read what he wanted. He saw this. Lippott never missed a look of this kind. She, like the rest, had to be careful of Lippott. But her talk seemed to him like the crisp, clean-petalled forced flowers in the florists' where Schneider bought his roses, his bouquets, his orchids. She was the woman Schneider had offered him, one of the earliest women of the days when Schneider was emerging from the period of East End fires and dubious liquidations. Lippott watched her as she walked to a gramophone. He smiled to think she did not know that Schneider had offered her to him.

"It is in walnut," she said. "The grain is like smoke"

"Holy smoke," he had his little joke, "if I know anything about the price."

"It gives a richness to the tone which I don't think any other wood gives." The voice went on skilfully arranging its words like flowers about every object.

He listened to her heels on the polished floor. He noted her sharp orders to the assistants, the swing of her ear-rings.

She's a good saleswoman, Lippott thought. And she's done well for herself. He put her in this shop; and she has her money, her flat. An ordinary girl from Kentish Town who sold programmes in the theatre. She has got on. Schneider's doing, but even Schneider could not have given her her chance if she hadn't had talent. It was the same with me. She had brains and Schneider spotted them.

He knew all about her. She was not Mrs Cambery, of course. Edwards was her real name. Like him, she had risen from nothing, absolutely nothing. They had worked their way up. They had travelled far, so far that no one would have known that she was a Board School girl and he was a Board School boy, both of them from a slum. There was the bond of Schneider between them. Lippott warmed.

This was in his mind all the time she was showing him the gramophones, pretending she did not know the prices and asking her assistants in a drawling voice. That pleased him. And yet there was one difference between them. Schneider had offered her to him and she did not know it. She did not know he was thinking, I could have had this woman.

Could he have had her? Of course. Schneider had said so. Everything belonged to Schneider, that was the wonderful thing about him. Yet one had to *be* Schneider to have everything Schneider offered. And Lippott knew as he saw her long, slender back arch over the instruments, and the ear-rings swing, that he could not be Schneider. She did not move to him as she would have moved instinctively had Schneider come into the shop, but she had stepped back, she had stopped, she had exclaimed and he had seen in her eyes the look he was used to seeing in the eyes of everyone, 'What's he up to? What is Schneider doing?'

Music was playing. She went to the instruments, raising the lids, putting on records, making music.

"Listen to this," she said.

"What is it?"

"A carol."

A lid was closed, there was the faint hiss of a record. Lippott sat down. He was already thinking he must get back. He placed his umbrella between his knees and stared at the carpet. For many years he had seen carpets and heard music together. Music meant hotels and restaurants, business lunches, evenings with Schneider's parties when he looked through the glass door after his own meal alone to see Schneider with his guests. The sound of music meant to him the spending of money. One could reckon up the price per bar, bill totals by the top notes. There was an instant association of a five-pound bill with the figure of the orchestra leader moving forward to the tables. The music waiter. There were orchestras whose music brought to the mind the price of champagne; there were Italian operas like the increment on private investments, with that sparkling beauty.

But the music which came from this gramophone had no financial context. Without warning, men stood up. Their voices were loud, sudden and deep. They seemed to leap upon his breast and tear his shirt front open, going straight for his heart.

*"Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even."*

He saw the snow.

"They're good," said Mrs Cambery. "Don't you think?"
He nodded.

*"Brightly shone the moon that night
Though the frost was cruel,
When a poor man came in sight,
Gathering winter fuel."*

He was at the Abbey Road school. The class was singing. He was working for his scholarship. The poor man gathering the fuel was Chas. Lippott. He was sorry for him. He was stirred by the memory of his miserable origins. In his childhood most of the days had been dark, he thought. There used to be continual fog. Then suddenly Schneider appeared.

"Bring me flesh and bring me wine,"

and,

"Thou and I shall see him dine."

And dine they had. He would never forget the first time he had been taken to dine by Schneider. He knew he was going up in the world then. He knew it had paid him to obliterate everything for Schneider. He had saved money on his own dinner that night and had drunk wine for the first time. Tears of pride were concealed in Lippott's eyes. He was an errand-boy in a shop. He had worked at evening classes and he had become a clerk. He went earlier to the office than everyone and he left latest. He worked till his eyes ached. At night he studied for his accountancy examinations. Slowly he advanced, eating no more than a bar of chocolate every day, never smoking, never drinking, never going to football matches or cinemas, never seeing girls He worked. He saved. His mother was left £50 and he re-invested it for her; he saw to it that money was put by for the funerals of his parents. He thought of everything. There were steps: from 27s. 6d. a week to 30s. a week, from 30s. a week to 35s., a sudden spring to £2, 5s., a leap to £4. Then Schneider had appeared and there

was a jump to £300 a year. That was the real beginning. For ten years he had had no holiday and had worked three Sundays out of four. And now he knew the truth of the last verse, Schneider triumphant, Lippott as close as the glove of his right hand.

*"Page and Monarch forth they went,
Forth they went together."*

It took a full male choir to sound like the reverberant voice of Schneider, hoarse and loud, a choir not a man.

Lippott said, "I'll buy it. What do I get—three months? Any discount for thirty days?" he said to Mrs Cambery.

"Makes one think of old times," she said, "doesn't it? Do you think we'll have snow?"

"No," he laughed mildly. "There is never any snow. We only get slush."

He left the shop. The roar of the street was sudden like the voices of the singers. He felt tired and irritable. In an obscure way he knew what was happening because he had known it before. It had gone four o'clock. The Schneider wave had passed. He had been borne out and now he floundered. Schneider must be near Paris now, but Lippott could not even imagine him there. The air was cold and rough to the throat, the pavements were chilled. Schneider had gone and there was the long row back. Lippott did not mind that he had paid 120 guineas for a gramophone, indeed he was proud of that. He knew, after a few yards, that Schneider working through the art of Mrs Cambery had seduced him into spending this money and he liked that. There was the pleasure of being secretly seduced by Mrs Cambery, of sharing her in this way with Schneider. Where Schneider went, where Schneider had paid his thousands, Lippott had pushed his little one hundred and twenty less discount. He was satisfied as he walked. But there was the Schneider who lived and the Schneider who had to be paid for. As he walked back to his office, through the caves of shop-light that had become more dazzling with the closing of the darkness, he felt himself the private custodian, the accountant of life and folly. His department went beyond Schneider into the world at large.

It was the end of the year and the accounts were being made. It was the time of the year when, at last, Lippott used to think, "We get down to bedrock, to the real thing". He was happiest at

this time. Everyone who came to his office brought him long sheets of foolscap covered with figures. He turned the corner and came down into the square where the Schneider House stood. The bare trees hung a net of branches against the dark lilac night and dripped on to the cab rank. Through the branches, like lanterns hanging among them, were the windows of the offices opposite. There was a building there like a cage of light floating over the earth. All the electricity, all the Schneider in the world had to be paid for.

He passed the Trade Entrance. The loading-bay was empty. There were cones of dim light over the empty loading-platform. The goods lifts were stationary and in the hollow of the fog were the figures of men in brown overalls. There were five of them, young men with cigarettes in their ears, and they were talking, doing nothing. By the entrance was the machine which punched their time-tickets and in the wall was a small office where the yard foreman sat. It was like a signal-box and a green shaded lamp was shining on the man's bald head bent over his book. (Mrs Cambery under another light did not know that Schneider had offered her to him.) No one knew what Schneider offered him. The workmen looked as they saw Lippott pass. He glanced at them and then went by towards the swing doors of the main entrance. They did not know who he was. It was ten days before Christmas, the slack time. One hundred and twenty pounds. Schneider must be paid for.

He nodded to the commissionaire and went up the stairs. Typists were laughing on the first landing. Quickly they ran away when they saw him. He went through glass doors and passed the frosted windows of corridors. An office door was open and he saw a pipe on a desk but no one there. Schneider must be paid for. He went along to his own office. On his desk were the foolscap sheets. He drew in his lips as if he were sipping tea, pleased by the sight of these papers. He knew the cost of everything, everything in the world.

In half an hour the building knew that he was the man who knew the cost of everything.

"Some people," he was saying in his office to one of the younger managers, "have got the wrong idea about this firm. They think it's just a milch cow. I don't care if it is a week before Christmas."

The bell rang in the time-keeper's office. He was a heavy man who wrote with difficulty in a small round hand.

"Yeah," he said. Then he was sitting bolt upright in his chair. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir," he said. A voice made neat by the telephone said:

"How many men have you got on the lifts?"

"Five, sir."

"Sack three," the voice said.

"Now, sir? This week, sir? Right, sir. I'll bring the names."

He put down the receiver and stared at the telephone. He closed up his delivery book, got down from his stool and went out, first of all, to have a look at the fog. Lippott, up above, was humming a tune he could not get out of his head.

You Make Your Own Life

UPSTAIRS from the street a sign in electric light said "Gent's Saloon." I went up. There was a small hot back room full of sunlight, with hair clippings on the floor, towels hanging from a peg and newspapers on the chairs. "Take a seat. Just finishing," said the barber. It was a lie. He wasn't anywhere near finishing. He had in fact just begun a shave. The customer was having everything.

In a dead place like this town you always had to wait. I was waiting for a train, now I had to wait for a haircut. It was a small town in a valley with one long street, and a slow mud-coloured river moving between willows and the backs of houses.

I picked up a newspaper. A man had murdered an old woman, a clergyman's sister was caught stealing gloves in a shop, a man who had identified the body of his wife at an inquest on a drowning fatality met her three days later on a pier. Ten miles from this town the skeletons of men killed in a battle eight centuries ago had been dug up on the Downs. That was nearer. Still, I put the paper down. I looked at the two men in the room.

The shave had finished now, the barber was cutting the man's hair. It was glossy black hair and small curls of it fell on the floor. I could see the man in the mirror. He was in his thirties. He had a swarthy skin and brilliant long black eyes. The lashes were long too, and the lids when he blinked were pale. There was just that suggestion of weakness. Now he was shaved there was a sallow glister to his skin like a Hindu's, and as the barber clipped away and grunted his breaths, the dark man sat engrossed in his reflection, half smiling at himself and very deeply pleased.

The barber was careful and responsible in his movements, but nonchalant and detached. He was in his thirties too, a young man with fair receding hair brushed back from his forehead. He did not speak to his customer. His customer did not speak to him. He went on from one job to the next silently. Now he was rattling his brush in the jar, wiping the razor, pushing the chair forward to the basin. Now he gently pushed the man's head down, now he ran the taps and was soaping the head and rubbing it. A

peculiar look of amused affection was on his face as he looked down at the soaped head.

"How long are you going to be?" I said. "I've got a train."

He looked at the clock. He knew the trains.

"Couple of minutes," he said.

He wheeled a machine on a tripod to the back of the man. A curved black thing like a helmet enclosed the head. The machine was plugged to the wall. There were phials with coloured liquids in them and soon steam was rushing out under the helmet. It looked like a machine you see in a Fun Fair. I don't know what happened to the man or what the barber did. Shave, hot towels, haircut, shampoo, this machine and then yellow liquid like treacle out of a bottle—that customer had everything.

I wondered how much he would have to pay.

Then the job was over. The dark man got up. The clippers had been over the back of his neck and he looked like a guardsman. He was dressed in a square-shouldered grey suit, very dandyish for this town, and he had a silk handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket. He wore a violet-and-silver tie. He patted it as the barber brushed his coat. He was delighted with himself.

"So long, Fred," he smiled faintly.

"Cheero, Albert," said the upright barber and his lips closed to a small, hardly perceptible smile too. Thoughtfully, ironically, the barber watched his handiwork go. The man hadn't paid.

I sat in the chair. It was warm, too warm, where the man had sat. The barber put the sheet round me. The barber was smiling to himself like a man remembering a tune. He was not thinking about me.

The barber said that machine made steam open the pores. He glanced at the door where the man had gone. "Some people want everything," he said, "some want nothing." You had to have a machine like that.

He tucked in the cotton-wool. He got out the comb and scissors. His fingers gently depressed my head. I could see him in the mirror bending to the back of my head. He was clipping away. He was a dull young man with pale blue eyes and a look of ironical stubbornness in him. The small dry smile was still like claw marks at the corners of his lips.

"Three bob a time," he said. He spoke into the back of my neck, and nodded to the door. "He has it every week."

He clipped away.

"His hair's coming out. That's why he has it. Going bald. You can't stop that. You can delay it, but you can't stop it. Can't always be young. He thinks you can." He smiled dryly but with affection.

"But he wasn't so old."

The barber stood up.

"That man!" he said. He mused to himself with growing satisfaction. He worked away in long silence as if to savour every possible flavour of my remark. The result of his meditation was to make him change his scissors for a finer pair.

"He ought to be dead," he said.

"T.B.," he said with quiet scorn.

He looked at me in the mirror.

"It's wonderful," he said, as if to say it was nothing of the sort.

"It's wonderful what the doctors can do," I said.

"I don't mean doctors," he said. "Consumptives! Tuh! They're wonderful." As much as to say a sick man can get away with anything—but you try if you're healthy and see what happens!

He went on cutting. There was a glint in his pale blue eyes. He snipped away amusedly as if he were attending to every individual hair at the back of my head.

"You see his throat?" he said suddenly.

"What about his throat?" I asked.

"Didn't you notice anything? Didn't you see a mark a bit at the side?" He stood up and looked at me in the mirror.

"No," I said.

He bent down to the back of my neck again. "He cut his throat once," he said quietly. "Not satisfied with T.B.," he said with a grin. It was a small, firm, friendly grin. "So long, Fred. Cheero, Albert. Tried to commit suicide."

"Wanted everything," I said.

"That's it," he said.

"A girl," the barber said. "He fell in love with a girl."

He clipped away.

"That's an item," said the barber absently.

"He fell in love with a local girl who took pity on him when he was in bed, ill. Nursed him. Usual story. Took pity on him, but wasn't interested in him in that way."

"A very attractive girl," said the barber.

"And he got it badly?"

"They get it badly, consumptives."

"Matter of fact," said the barber, stepping over for the clippers and shooting a hard sideways stare at me, "it was my wife."

"Before she was my wife," he said. There was a touch of quiet, amused resolution in him.

He'd known that chap since he was a kid. Went to school with him. Used to be his best friend. Still was. Always a lad. Regular nut. Had a milk business, was his own guv'nor till he got ill. Doing well.

"He knew I was courting her," he smiled. "That didn't stop him." There was a glint in his eye.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I lay low," he said.

"She had a job in the shop opposite. If you passed that shop you couldn't help noticing her in the cash-desk near the door. It's not for me to say—but she was the prettiest girl in this town," he said. "Still is," he mused.

"You've seen the river? You came over it by the station," he said. "Well, he used to take her on the river when I was busy. I didn't mind. I knew my mind. She knew hers. I knew it was all right."

"I knew him," he grinned. "But I knew her. 'Let him take you on the river,' I said."

I saw the barber's forehead and his dull blue eyes looking up for a moment over my head in the mirror.

"Damp river," he said reflectively. "Damp mists, I mean, on the river. Very flat, low lying, unhealthy," he said. "That's where he made his mistake. It started with him taking her on the river."

"Double pneumonia once," he said. "Sixty cigarettes a day, burning the candle at both ends."

He grunted.

"He couldn't get away with it," he said.

When he got ill, the girl used to go and look after him. She used to go and read to him in the afternoons. "I used to turn up in the evenings, too, when we'd closed."

The barber came round to the front and took the brushes lazily. He glanced sardonically at the door as if expecting to see

the man standing there. That cocksure irony in the barber seemed to warm up.

"Know what he used to say to her?" he said sharply and smiled when I was startled. "'Here, Jenny,' he used to say. 'Tell Fred to go home and you pop into bed with me. I'm lonely.'" The young barber gave a short laugh.

"In front of me," he said.

"What did you say?"

"I told him to keep quiet or there'd be a funeral. Consumptives want it, they want it worse than others, but it kills them," he said.

"I thought you meant *you'd* kill him," I said.

"Kill him?" he said. "Me kill him?" He smiled scornfully at me: I was an outsider in this. "He tried to kill *me*," he said.

"Yeah," he said, wiping his hands on a towel. "Tried to poison me. Whisky. It didn't work. Back O.K.?" he said, holding up a mirror. "I don't drink."

"I went to his room," he said. "I was his best friend. He was lying on the bed. Thin! All bones and blue veins and red patches as if he'd been scalded and eyes as bright as that bottle of bath salts. Not like he is now. There was a bottle of whisky and a glass by the side of the bed. He wanted me to have a drop. He knew I didn't drink."

"'I don't want one,' I said. 'Yes, you do,' he said. 'You know I never touch it,' I said. 'Well, touch it now,' he said. 'I tell you what,' he said, 'you're afraid.' 'Afraid of what?' I said. 'Afraid of catching what I've got.' 'Touch your lips to it if you're not afraid. Just have a sip to show.'"

"I told him not to be a fool. I took the bottle from him. He had no right to have whisky in his state. He was wild when I took it. 'It'll do some people a bit of good,' I said, 'but it's poison to you.'"

"'It is poison,' he said."

"I took the bottle away. I gave it to a chap in the town. It nearly finished him. We found out it *was* poison. He'd put something in it."

I said I'd have a singe. The barber lit the taper. I felt the flame warm against my head. "Seals up the ends," the barber said. He lifted up the hair with the comb and ran the flame along. "See the idea?" he said.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just married my girl that week," the barber said. "When she told him we were going to get married he said, 'I'll give you something Fred won't give you.' We wondered what it would be. 'Something big,' he said. 'Best man's present,' he said. He winked at her. 'All I've got. I'm the best man.' That night he cut his throat." The barber made a grimace in the mirror, passed the scissors over his throat and gave a grin.

"Then he opened the window and called out to a kid in the street to fetch *her*. The kid came to me instead. Funny present," he said. He combed, he patted, he brushed. He pulled the wool out of the back of my neck. He went round it with the soft brush. Coming round to the front he adroitly drew off the sheet. I stood up.

"He got over it," he said. "Comes round and plays with my kids on Sundays. Comes in every Friday, gets himself up. See him with a different one every week at the Pictures. It's a dead place this, all right in the summer on the river. You make your own life. The only thing is he don't like shaving himself now, I have to go over every morning and do it for him."

He stood with his small grin, his steady eyes amused and resolute. "I never charge him," he said. He brushed my coat, he brought my hat.

Miss Baker

WHEN Easter came she knew that her time of fasting was drawing to a close; for three weeks she had not spoken. God had given her nothing to say to the world. She had prayed—for prayer always transposed her great sorrow—but He had become very small and far away like a very high and soundless bird. Yet in these days of the triumph of spring and of His Son she had heard Him moving. On Easter Monday she got up from her chair and looked into the mirror and spoke for the first time.

"There you are, Miss Baker!" she said to her image. "Your hair is beautiful and yellow."

She watched the image, expectantly crinkling her pale eyes—there might be a miracle—but her lips in the mirror did not move.

"Poor darling," said Miss Baker to the image at last. "You are caught." And she smiled sadly though there was a fine curl of slyness at the corner of her lips. It was at this point when she might have broken down in a passion of sadness, when she had already the silver hairbrush in her hand raised to smash the mirror into a great gasping star, that the Voice of God stopped her with a whisper. So quietly the Voice spoke that for the moment she might have been deceived. It said, "Go ye into all the world." That was all. She wanted to hear more, but when nothing came she understood.

She washed her face and brushed back her yellow hair over her ears to hear and understand the Voice again. She put on her white dress for her purity. "You are good to me, too good to me, Miss Baker," she said to the image in the mirror, thanking it with her repentance.

Then with a devout languor, very slowly before the glass she raised her arms in their long white sleeves, leaned back and closed her eyes; she was crucified upon herself.

When she came down from the cross the devils had gone. She put on a white straw hat with a broad brim and daisies round the crown. She took her umbrella, saw that the gas was turned off and that her key was in her bag and every window closed, and went

out. To her surprise night had already fallen and the stairs were dark. Down six flights of stairs she went lower and lower into all the world. Sounds of traffic and of people walking came nearer and nearer from the street, starting like birds from her descending feet and rising in flocks until as she stepped down on to the pavement she was surrounded by them.

But like a ghost in her white dress she moved untouched by the things and creatures she touched. It was a cold night and people were wearing coats and hurrying. Their breath puffed out in clouds. The world smelled. It smelled of beer and frying meat, of vegetables in the market, of motor cars and oil, and the steam of a laundry. The world made noises. The scrawling noise of boots on the pavement, the sizzle of motor-car wheels, the deep mayoral bark of horns, the vicissitudes of voices. She walked through the music of a barrel organ, through halls and fountains of music, but her mind listened to none of the sounds that her ears heard. When she stopped dead still and listened, it was to hear again the guiding Voice.

She prayed in these moments humbly, not with the arrogance of expecting to be heard, though when she opened her eyes again it seemed the world was more contented and long and happily married. The eyes of the houses were alight and in the early darkness, she thought, they looked so nice and comfortable like old gentlemen with spectacles on, smoking their pipes. She walked on and on, from street to street, going into as many streets as she could and saying nothing, her lips very full and still and slightly smiling and the colour of her eyes fading as the inner light shone brighter. Wherever she took her whiteness she could feel the pain of the world going away.

Yet she was not white and pure enough, for the Voice did not come again though she listened for it. Why did the Voice not speak again? Perhaps an hour had passed or two or three hours. People looked at her. Then when she opened her eyes from prayer she saw on the opposite side of the street a shining pool. I do not hear His Voice, she said, but He leadeth me beside still waters, even though it is only a puddle. And she had a very clever pouting and joking look on her face as she waited for the traffic to pass and crossed the street. On the pavement she found a dry, clean spot, dusted it with her handkerchief and sat down. "It is not very comfortable," she said aloud in case people should think her

foolish, "but it will do." Very decently she pulled her dress down to her ankles and sighed, closing her eyes but too tired for prayer, and in those unguarded minutes an errand-boy went by and staggered into a long, walking-backwards stare. An old woman passed with a chain of three children walking backwards, too. A young man in a mackintosh took his pipe out of his mouth, swivelled round and then turned back to her:

"Excuse me—er—miss," he said. "Allow me," he said, touching her shoulder. "Are you ill?"

She was charming and frigid to him. His face was stupid with health.

"No, I am merely resting, thank you," she said.

A fat carpenter with a sandy moustache, and a bag of tools in his hand, came up and nudged the young man.

"What's up?" he asked. "Bin knocked down?"

"Dunno," said the young man. "Says she's resting."

The carpenter stared and then bent down himself.

"Anything the matter, miss?" he said.

"Nothing, thank you. It's not very comfortable but I am resting," she said.

Oh, for five minutes' rest! Would God not give her just five minutes? Great weariness was streaming up out of the pavement into her and the street was heaving as if in it some tide had turned. Three young girls from a factory stopped chattering to look at her. Two of them giggled with embarrassment, but the third, who was dark and compassionate, knelt at Miss Baker's feet and looked clearly into her eyes.

"There is nothing the matter," said Miss Baker before the girl could speak. "I am only waiting for Someone. Please go!" she said, turning to the small crowd. They were very startled because she had a ladylike voice. They shifted their feet, glanced up and down the empty street looking out for danger, saw people in the distance and re-encouraged by the sight closed round her again.

"Where do you live?" asked the kneeling girl. "Let me take you home."

"Where do she live?" asked the carpenter.

"She says she's waiting for someone," said the girl.

"For Someone," Miss Baker subtly corrected. They were puzzled and abashed. Malign, she studied their feet to embarrass the people, and when she put on the look of adding up their faces

they turned away. But they did not go. The crowd had greatly increased. There was the inner ring composed of the young man, the carpenter, the kneeling girl and two or three others at the heart of the mystery. There was the second ring. There was a third ring which, between trying to reply to the outer ring and ask the second ring for information at the same time, got no satisfaction and could not get away either. The crowd stood there like oxen with all their weight. Their pipes smoked. Their breath steamed. Their eyes, like bright creeping things, she felt, wandered over her. "It's a girl," said the carpenter, swelling out in the chest. At last the outer ring forced a victory. "Here's a copper," cried a boy at the back and the circles opened to admit the weight of the policeman. They made way for him and closed in after him. He was a young policeman with very clean cheeks and all his weight went from one foot to the other. He was very heavy and calm, but he was blushing.

"Stand back," he said raising his voice, to give himself more space to be calm in. He put his hands on his knees and bent down to Miss Baker.

"Please, officer," she said. "Tell all these people to go away."

"Stand back," said the policeman again to cover his bewilderment.

"If you are all right you must move on, ma'am," he said uncertainly. "You are obstructing, miss."

"I am not obstructing," said Miss Baker very sharply and tightening her long white gloves on her fingers.

"Causing a crowd to collect . . ." said the policeman in his quoting voice. "Causing an obstruction. . . ."

"I am not obstructing. It is all these people who are obstructing. Please, officer," said Miss Baker with imperious lucidity, "please tell them to go away."

The policeman swallowed and stood up because his back was uncomfortable and so was his reason. He advanced upon the crowd, waving his arms. "Move along there," he said. "Move along now. Hear what I say?"

The ranks thinned out before him, and as they did so Miss Baker very quickly, quietly and cleverly got up and walked away in the opposite direction, at first lightly shaking the looks of the gaping crowd off her back. She walked on twenty or thirty yards and one or two ran on to get ahead of her and some nervously

followed to be within reach but without responsibility if something happened again. The rest had wavered backwards and forwards and the policeman stood in the middle of the pavement, his head held together by his helmet strap. She walked on blindly straight. The heads of the crowd still seemed to her to be stretching after her like the shooting heads of serpents. She waved her umbrella to beat them off, but the miserable heads came on. She hurried to get out of reach. If she could only get a few yards ahead of them into solitude and into the charmed circle of prayer. If she could stop and hear the Voice. If only she could hear the Voice!

But now the invisible serpents had caught her and were in her head, filling it with their thoughts. She struggled bravely against them. And it was this struggle which filled her with towering rage. They were slaves. She was free. What right had the slaves of the serpent over the free? She trembled with rage. Defiantly sure of her right, she sat down on the pavement again.

She sat down and her spirit darkened with passionate affirmations of her freedom. It was her pavement as much as anyone else's. She had a right in law. Her cheeks flushed and she felt giddiness and darkness of blood in her head and the answering heat of defiance in her hands, her bosom and throat. She gathered all her forces into this narrow compass of personal assertion and defiance and magnified herself until there was no room for the Voice of God; and only the roar of the world was in her ears. She pushed back her white hat and her yellow hair began to fall over her face. She dug her nails into her umbrella. She was weeping passionately, and with shudders of hatred, abandoning herself to sin; beside her now was no healing pool. In the bars of the drain of the gutter beside her was the entrance into hell and the fingers of Anti-Christ were clawing at the bars. Down and down she was being dragged. It was with unspeakable gratitude she rose to go away with the policeman when he came again.

The following crowd stared at the empty door of the police station long after she had gone in. Generations of minutes bred and passed like ants. She seemed to be sitting on a bench in the police station and sometimes she was interested when a face with moving lips came nearer to her, but she could not think about the questions the lips asked her. She saw a man with a number on his collar, scratching his head, staring at his writing, and two or

three times he spoke into the telephone. It did seem that they wanted something that she could give, but when she gave them her handbag they returned it to her. The policeman with the clean face who had brought her took her umbrella. When she got her handbag back she opened it and looked into the mirror.

"Oh, Miss Baker, you are a dear to come with me," she murmured, glancing slyly to see if anyone was watching her. "Where would I be without you! You and I in a police station, Miss Baker!"

She tidied her hair, and before she had done this—which was very embarrassing—the man with the number on his collar put down his glasses and got down from his high desk. He walked across to her quietly and again began to ask her things. And at last it came to her very clearly that he wanted to know her name. Clearly as she heard the Voice speaking she heard another voice speak distinctly in her throat: "Legion," it answered. "L-E-G-I-O-N?" spelled the surprised officer. "And what address?"

But the other voice saw the trap and would not answer. Inside her it laughed like a flame.

They led her into an inner room and gave her some tea. She heard them telephoning again, far away the voices alighting in the places where the bells had rung, clapping down upon them quickly. Her mind drifted through parks and gardens and fountains which slowly quenched her inward flame. The room was peaceful and she could feel peace returning. And then, far away among the telephoning voices she heard a stirring in the air like the movement that came when the Voice was going to speak. She looked up quickly in this direction. And she saw a man in the room. There was peace in him she saw at once. He was huddled on a bench near her, his legs sprawling wide. His body lay in big, smiling curves of fatness. His sandy hair was sprinkled neatly and thinly over his head and in the gas-light gleamed like a halo. But his features were ugly, brutal and sodden, his thick mouth had dropped open, many of his front teeth were chipped and he grunted half-asleep with the snort of a pig. His little blue eyes were half-blindly peeping. Once or twice he muttered and wagged his head and the policeman who was at the door of the room grinned.

She smiled and gazed at the man, not pushing herself out to him, but casting aside all aggression of the bodily will so that it

was Sight that saw him and not herself. There poured out love and compassion for the man who was drowned in sleep. Out of him the Voice could speak. And in this knowledge she forgot about herself and her right, about drunkenness; and where the drunk man was, was a shape that would become the figure of God. The Voice was coming. Distantly like a high bird descending she could see the Voice; nearer and near it circled down, till as pure as a far-away bugle the sound came into her, saying to all her blood:

"Speak to me."

Speak to Him. She who had always listened *for* Him, now to speak *to* Him! She rose up with no hesitation and touched the drunk man on the shoulder and shook him. His eyes opened and quivered and closed again. She took him by his hand and his eyes opened very wide and stared. Then slowly he gave a long, creeping, dirty grin.

"This is Peniel," she said, "the place of names. What is your name?" she asked him earnestly.

He stared and his face sank deeper and deeper, more satiate into his folds of smile, and a sparkle of wetness came on the corner of his lower lip.

"Tell me your name," she begged.

He looked at her doubtfully and at last muttered thickly: "Shepherd."

Her face became radiant. Her neck was pale and her throat beseeching as she took his hand in both of hers and said rapturously:

"Then I am one of Your Sheep!"

"Here," muttered the drunk man, pulling his hand away and recoiling at the meaning in her eyes and lips. "You know shlot 'bout this shex stuff, donchyer."

And pushed her violently away. But she stood up and said aloud, laughing mildly in the duplicity of the revelation her great sorrow had given her and holding out her arms in trembling white sleeves and raising her head:

"I have found my Lord! Miss Baker, darling, we have found our Lord."

Double Divan

TWO workmen were carrying a double divan bed, slung on ropes from their shoulders, down the busy streets in the warm fume of a London dusk. The man behind was ginger-haired. He had a moustache of sweat, a hard, factory mouth, and blue, unwilling eyes. The weight of the bed kept his head down, and the pace of the big-potato-bummed man in front was dragging him along on the tips of his toes almost at a trot. They were travelling fast.

Presently the traffic lights were against them and they stood still.

"How much farther?" said the man in front. He could not turn his head.

"You're bloody right," said the man behind.

The lights changed, the traffic gave a loud swallow and moved forward, and the two men were driven over the crossing. On they raced, not daring to stop. They came to a wide road-junction and then the lights went red again. The man behind felt the warm radiator of a lorry toasting his backside.

"Gone deaf or something; how much farther?" called back the man in front.

"What d'you mean, how much farther? You got the paper," said the man behind.

"What bleeding paper?" said the man in front.

"The address she give you," said the man behind.

"Who?" said the man in front.

"The paper she give you," said the man behind.

"I haven't got no bleeding paper," said the man in front.

The man behind rolled his eyes and wagged his knees about. The bed swayed with him and the man in front went as pink as a sausage in the neck as he steadied it.

"Call the keeper, lock me up, I'm barmy," said the man behind.

Motor horns started blowing, the lorry radiator pressed closely on the trousers of the man behind. A bus driver put his head out and shouted: the lights had changed. The two heaved at the bed and rushed over the crossing. They advanced to the next side-

turning and the leader swung round there, put his end of the bed down and they faced each other.

"She spoke to you. You was the last to see her," said the leader. "She didn't give me no address."

"You fixed the job. All she said to me was, 'Be careful. Be careful,' she said, 'and mind the casters,'" said the man behind.

The man in front was large and dazed. He wiped his forehead and felt in his jacket pockets. A pigeon came down in the dusk and he looked at the bird enquiringly. He felt in his waistcoat pocket and looked up to the rows of windows for help. All knowledge of where he had been told to take the bed had gone. The man behind took the rope off his aching shoulders and threw it on the bed.

"What name was it?" said the man behind.

"Ida or Mary or like that," said the man in front.

"Ida or Mary, very tasty, very sweet," jeered the man behind. "Ida what?"

"I'm trying to think," said the man in front.

"You'd better stop thinking and go back and find her," said the man behind.

"She's left. Moved out," said the man in front.

The man behind sat down on the bed and took his cap off. "Is she waiting there—where we're going, this woman, this Ida, this party?"

"I got it!" exclaimed the man in front. "Robinson—that's the name. Mrs Robinson. There was two of them."

The man behind got up and rolled his eyes and put his tongue out. "Open the door," he cried. "Open the door and let me out."

The large man stood searching his mind.

"She came over to the yard in the morning," the man in front said. "'The name is Robinson, Mrs Robinson,' she says. 'My sister is moving her flat and I want you to get a bed out for her, a big one.' Married woman, see, giving orders, doesn't tell you anything and expects you to know the lot. 'I can't do that,' I says, 'I work all day.' 'I don't want it moved in the daylight,' she says. 'It's not my bed, it's my sister's.' 'I don't want to know your business,' I says. 'I'll move what you like, but I can't do it till the evening.' 'What are we arguing about?' she says. 'That's what I want you to do.'"

"Get on," said the man. "I don't half sweat."

"She give me the address. Next thing, after work, I go up to the flat. Number twenty-six. Top floor. She comes out with glasses on. The carpets are gone, all the furniture, just the bed in the back room. 'I'll tell my sister,' she says. 'Ida,' she calls out. 'Here's the man.' Ida—that's the sister, see—comes out of the kitchen. 'What man, Mary?' says the sister. 'The man about the bed,' says this Mrs Robinson."

"Step on it," said the man behind.

"I can't," said the man in front, "or you won't follow. This Ida wasn't like the other. She had a fur coat on and first of all I thought she was sweating, her face was red and steamy, only a girl. She had a handkerchief in her hand and she dropped it. 'Excuse me,' I said, and picked it up. It was wet. She was crying. She gives one look at me and then the waterworks start up again and she goes off to the kitchen, leaving me, see, with the other one. 'Wait here,' Mrs Robinson says. 'I must go to my sister. She's not very well. She's upset.' 'Oh,' I says, 'having trouble . . .?'"

"Here," said the man behind. "Pack it up. Here's a van coming. We got trouble here."

The two men put the ropes round their necks and moved on to the entrance to a public-house yard. The dray horses struck with bearded hoofs at the cobbles as they strained past.

"Put her here," said the man behind, lowering his end. "I'm going to have a beer."

The two men stood the striped bed on end against the side wall of the public-house. They looked at the bed, silently telling it not to move while they were gone, and they went into the public-house. The shadow of the bed could be seen against the frosted glass of the bar window.

"Know anyone of the name of Robinson round here?" said the man behind. "Number 26, The Terrace?"

"You see hundreds of faces, you never know the names," the barman said, picking up his cigarette from the bar.

"We're moving a bed," said the man behind, "for a Mrs Ida something."

"Miss, not Mrs," said the man in front. "She wasn't married."

"Mrs, must be," said the man behind. "Double bed."

"That don't follow," said the barman, winking at the customers.

"It'd be a funny thing for a single woman to have a double bed," a man said.

"What's funny in that?" the barman said.

"When his old woman rolls on him," the customer said. "I sleep with myself."

"I lay you do, Jim," said the barman.

Two squeaks of laughter went up from two old women sitting on a bench.

"She is a young woman and she isn't married," said the man in front.

"It must be," said the man behind, "some tart."

"Oh dear," said one of the women on the bench, hiding her face in the top of her glass. "Language, now we hear it."

"Ginger," said the leader, taking his beer to a table, "you're right. That Mrs Robinson must have given me the paper and it has dropped out. She wrote it down on the mantelpiece, and while she was writing her sister called out from the kitchen and Mrs Robinson put the pencil down and says, 'I'll be back. My sister wants to talk to me.'"

He sat down, the man in front said, and he waited in the flat. He sat on the bed; it was the only thing in the room to sit on. "The only furniture they hadn't moved," he said, "was a brass coal-scuttle with some fire-irons and an electric kettle in it." He knew about that because he had had an eye on the electric kettle, and Mrs Robinson knew he had because she said to him, "Don't you touch those. They are mine." The flat was a pretty place; to give an example, the paint was green, but not the common green, and the walls were pink, but not what you would call right out pink: a lady's place. You could tell that by Ida's voice.

"Perhaps," said the man behind, going up to the bar for two more pints and speaking over his shoulder as though he were spitting, "she couldn't pay the rent. Was it a shop? Did she give you the address of a shop?"

"No," said the man in front, "it wasn't a shop. I had a look out of the window. You could see the canal through the tops of the trees. And that's what messed me up. They were having an argument next door. I could hear them carrying on. The next thing the door bangs. Mrs Robinson shouts out in a temper, 'I'll

tell him to go.' There's a sort of free-for-all in the door and in comes the sister, Ida, who was crying. She marches up to me and she says, very sharp, 'Give me a pencil. I want you to take this bed to Mrs Robinson's house.' Of course, I hadn't got a pencil. But before I could tell her this, Mrs Robinson comes in. She was shouting. 'No, Ida,' she says, 'I won't have it. Not after what you said. You're a pig. Keep your beastly bed.' Your beastly bed, oh dear, that's what she said. She says, 'I am only trying to help you. If you haven't got any reputation to think of,' she says, 'the rest of the family have. What would the neighbours say if they saw a double bed go out of a single girl's flat into the van with the rest in broad daylight? There,' she says, 'Ida, I've told you the plain truth. Someone's got to tell you.' "

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," said the man behind. "Sisters, you say."

"Taking no notice of me," said the man in front. "I'm the wall. 'Now which of you ladies is having it?' I says. 'I'm having these,' says Mrs Robinson, picking up the scuttle and things in both arms like someone was robbing her. 'My sister's having it,' says Ida, opening her bag and looking for a pen. 'No,' says Mrs Robinson, putting down the scuttle and snatching her pen from her. 'Not after what you said. We've slept in a single bed all the time we've been married and we can carry on.' A regular ding-dong. And then Mrs Robinson says, 'What are you going to sleep on to-night, Ida?' "

"Ah!" said the man behind.

"Oh dear," said the man in front. "You ought to have seen Ida's face. She stops talking, her mouth stays open. She gives a hoot as if she had struck a mine. 'Ooh! Oooh!' she goes. There's a flood again. 'Oooh,' she hoots, 'what shall I do, what shall I do? I don't care where I sleep. I don't care what happens to me.' And then she goes over to the window and cries out, 'I shall throw myself in the canal. I shall kill myself. I don't want to live. I told him I would, he's broken my heart.' "

"Mrs Robinson says, 'The number of times you've hanged yourself, drowned yourself, and put your head in the gas oven, Ida, you'd fill a cemetery. He was a married man and you knew it. You said the same after Arthur and after Len. Please excuse me,' she says to me."

"And Ida answers back: 'You're married, Mary. You've got a

husband and children. Won't anyone marry me? I came home from the office and I cooked him a meal every night.' "

" 'That was Philip, not this one,' Mrs Robinson calls out. 'Because of his stomach.' "

"Ida looks at her sister and stops crying at this. Annoyed. 'There were two with bad stomachs,' Ida says sharp. 'You're always unfair to me. They said it was because of their wives.' "

"That's what she said," said the man in front, looking at his untouched beer with indignation, indignant with himself. He took a long swallow of it.

"Straight," he said, watching the beads of froth float on the dark current towards his lips. He put the glass down; he had finished it. "Two married men with bad stomachs."

"And then," he said, "Ida, the single girl, began to laugh, not a laugh in the ordinary way . . ."

"Hysterics," said the man behind. "My wife's sister does it."

"No," said the man in front. "Too dry. More like a bark than a laugh. She laughed at Mrs Robinson, she laughed at me. 'Oh dear,' she laughed. She couldn't stop. 'It's all because I had a double bed,' she says, 'I ought to have kept to singles.' "

"You ought to have seen the married one's face when she said this. Didn't like it. In front of me, see. I couldn't help it, could I? 'Oooh, Ida,' she says, 'how can you?' Very classy. 'Don't mind me,' I says. Ida gives me a wink. 'Oh yes it is,' Ida says. 'Ask this gentleman. I'll never get married till I get a single, will I?' she says. 'Ida, shut up!' says Mrs Robinson. 'It's no good rushing things, miss,' I says. 'There you are!' says Ida.

"She comes up to me," says the man in front, "this Ida, and she says, 'Take this bed and the coal-scuttle and things to my sister's address. She's a respectable married woman.' And then she turns on her sister and says, 'You had the fender when Arthur left me and the armchair, Mary. I'm keeping the rest till next time. You've furnished your flat bit by bit out of my broken heart.' You ought to have seen the look she gave her sister; sarcastic, it wiped the floor up with a wet rag all round her. If looks could kill."

"I know what I'd do," said the man behind, "with a girl like that Ida if she was my daughter. I'd take her knickers down and I'd paste her. What's class? A tart's a tart anywhere. My wife's sister is one—talk of love, it's turned on like a tap."

"There was the best electric kettle in that scuttle that I ever see," said the man in front.

The two men studied the shadow of the bed on the window. It did not seem to them like the bed they had been talking about and they bought two more drinks in order to be able to look it in the face. They went outside and they were astonished to find the dusk had gone—the London night was in full bud and blossom. They swayed down the yard entrance and considered the bed with many renewed attempts at impartiality. With its very wide stripes it was an object now hard to focus.

"Better lift it into the yard," said the man in front, "so's no one will touch it while we go back to the house."

They lifted the bed and lowered it again in the yard at the back of the public-house.

"A bed like that's worth a bit of money," said the man behind. "It's worth fifteen quid."

"Twenty," from the man in front.

"Seven years ago, before the war, you'd have given ten pounds for it," said the man behind.

"Talk sense," said the man in front, suddenly lighting with rage. "The war didn't last seven years."

A quarrel broke out between the two men. Their shouts banged about up and down the yard until the dogs barked at them.

"Where's the money for this job?" shouted the man behind. "I don't let go of this bed till I get my money."

The man in front suddenly sat down.

"You'll get your money," he said.

"Too true I will," said the man behind. "I'm going back to the house to see if they're there."

And he went. The man in front watched him go without surprise. When he was out of sight the man in front began to feel the springs, and then gently to bounce up and down. He smiled as he bounced and then the smile grew to a laugh. "Oh dear, what a disappointment for Mrs Robinson," he said. And to spite her he put his feet up on the bed and lay down. "I wonder," he said, "what that other poor girl is doing now?"

He was asleep when Mrs Robinson, Ida, and the man behind returned. They found the bed in the darkness by his snores.

"Mary," cried out Ida, clapping her hands, "there's a man in it."

The Ape

THE fruit robbery was over. It was the greatest fruit robbery, and from our point of view the most successful, ever known in our part of the jungle. Not that we can take all the credit for that, for it was not ourselves who started the fight but our enemies, a colony of apes who live in another tree. They were the first to attack and by the time the great slaughter was over hundreds of their dead, of both sexes, lay on the ground, and we had taken all their fruit. It was a fortunate triumph for us.

But apes are not a complacent or ungrateful race. Once we were back in our tree binding up our wounds, we thought at once of commemorating our victory and thanking our god for it. For we are aware that if we do not thank our god for his benefactions he might well think twice before he sent us another fruit robbery of this triumphant kind. We thought, therefore, of how we might best please him. We tried to put ourselves in his place. What would most impress him? There were many discussions about this: we screamed and screeched in passionate argument and the din grew so loud—far louder than the noise we make in the ordinary business of eating or defending our places in the tree or making love and dying—that at last our oldest and wisest ape, who lived at the very top, slyly observed: "If I were god and had been looking down at this tree of screeching monkeys for thousands of years, the thing that would really impress me would be silence." We were dumbfounded. Then one or two of us shouted: "That's got it. Let silence be the commemoration of our victory."

So at last it was arranged. On the anniversary of the day when the great fruit robbery began, we arranged that all of us would stop whatever we were doing and would be silent.

But nothing is perfect in the jungle. You would think that all apes would be proud to be alike, and would have the wisdom to abide by the traditions of their race and the edicts of their leader. You would think all would destroy the individual doubt with the reflection that however different an ape may fancy he is, the glory of the ape is that as he is now so he always has been,

unchangeable and unchanged. There were, however, some, and one in particular as you will see, who did not think so.

We heard of them from a pterodactyl, a rather ridiculous neighbour of ours.

The pterodactyl lived on a cliff just above our tree and often, scaly and long-necked, he would flop clumsily down to talk to us. He was a sensationalist and newsmonger, a creature with more curiosity than brains. He was always worried. What (he would ask us) is the meaning of life? We scratched our heads. Where was it all leading? We spat out fruit pips. Did we apes think that we would always go on as we were? That question was easy. Of course, we said. How fortunate we were, he said, for he had doubts about himself. "It seems to me that I am becoming—extinct," he said.

It was all very well of us to make light of it, he said, but "if I had not lived near you such an idea would never have entered my head." We replied that we did not see what we had done to upset him. "Oh, not you in particular," he said. "It is your young apes that are worrying me. They keep talking about their tails."—"No livelier or more flourishing subject," we said. "We apes delight in our tails."—"As far as I can see," the pterodactyl said, "among your younger apes, they are being worn shorter and will soon be discarded altogether."—"What!" we exclaimed—he could have touched us on no more sensitive spot—"How dare you make such a suggestion!"—"The suggestion," the pterodactyl said, "does not come from me but from your young apes. There's a group of them. They caught me by the neck the other day—I am very vulnerable in the neck—and ridiculed me publicly before a large audience. 'A flying reptile,' they said. 'Study him while you can for the species won't exist much longer—any more than *we apes shall go about on four legs and have tails*. We shall, at some unknown time in the future, but a time that comes rapidly nearer, cease to be apes. We shall become man. The pterodactyl, poor creature, came to the end of his evolutionary possibilities long ago.' "

"Man!" we exclaimed. "Man! What is that?" And what on earth, we asked the pterodactyl, did he mean by "evolution"? We had never heard of it. We pressed the pterodactyl to tell us more, but he would only repeat what he had already said. When he had flopped back to his cliff again we sat scratching ourselves, deep in thought. Presently our old and wisest ape, a horny and

scarred old warrior who sits dribbling away quietly to himself all day and rubbing his scars on the highest branch of all, gave a snigger and said, "Cutting off their tails to spite the ape." We did not laugh. We couldn't take the matter as lightly as he took it. We, on the contrary, raged. It was blasphemy. The joy, the pride, the whole apehood of us apes is in our tails. They are the flag under which we fight, the sheet-anchor of our patriotism, the vital insignia of our race. This young, decadent post-fruit-robbery generation was proposing to mutilate the symbol which is at the base of all our being. We did not hesitate. Spies were at once sent down to the lower branches to see if what the pterodactyl had told us was true and to bring the leader into our presence.

But before I tell what happened I must describe what life in our tree is like. The tree is a vast and leafy one, dense in the ramification of its twigs and branches. In the upper branches, where the air is freer and purer and the sunlight is plentiful, live those of us who are called the higher apes; in the branches below, and even to the bottom of the trunk, swarm the thousands of lower apes, clawing and scrambling over one another's backs, massing on the boughs until they nearly break, clutching at twigs and leaves, hanging on to one another's legs and tails and all bellowing and screeching in the struggle to get up a little higher and to find a place to sit, so that when we say, as we do, that the nature of life is struggle and war we are giving a faithful report from what is going on below us.

We in the upper branches eat our fruit in peace and spit out the pips and drop the rind upon the crowd below. It is they who, without of course intending to do so, bring us our food. Each of them carries fruit for himself, but the struggle is so violent that it is hard for them to hold the fruit or to find a quiet place where they can eat it. Accordingly we send down some of our cleverer apes—those who are not quite at the top of the tree yet and perhaps will never get there because they have more brain than claw—and these hang down by their tails and adroitly flick the fruit out of the hands of the climbers. Very amusing it is to watch the astonishment of the climbers when they see their fruit go, because a minute before, they were full of confidence; then astonishment changes to anger and you see them grab the fruit from their nearest neighbours, who in turn grab from the next. Failing in this, they have to go down once more to the bottom to get more fruit

and begin again; and as no part of the struggle is more difficult than the one which takes place at the bottom, an ape will go to any lengths, even to the risk of his life, to avoid that catastrophe. So for thousands of years have we lived, and only when fruit on our own tree is short or when we can bear no longer the sight of an abundance of fruit on another tree, occupied by just such a tribe of apes as ourselves, do our masses cease their engaging civil struggle and at an order from us higher apes above, go forth upon our great fruit robberies. It is plain that if in any respect an ape ceased to be an ape, our greatness would decline, and anarchy would follow, i.e. how would we at the top get our food?—and we should lose our tree and be destroyed by some stronger tribe. Our thoughts can therefore be imagined when the spies brought before us the leader of that group of apes who were preparing to monkey with our dearest emblem. He stood before us—and that is astonishing, for we apes do not habitually stand for long. Then he was paler than our race usually is, less hairy, fearless—very un-apelike that—and upright on his hind legs, not seeking support for his forelegs on some branch. These hung at his side or fidgeted with an aimless embarrassment behind his back. We growled at him and averted our eyes from his stupidly steadfast stare—for as a fighting race we are made subtle by fear and look restlessly, suspiciously around us, continually preparing for the sudden feint, the secret calculation, the necessary retreat, the unexpected attack. Nothing delivers an ape more readily to his enemy than a transparently straightforward look; but this upright ape had already lost so much of his apehood that he had forgotten the evasions of a warrior race. He was not even furtive. And in another way, too, he had lost our tradition. He spoke what was in his mind. This, I need hardly say, is ridiculous in a warrior whose business is to conceal his real purpose from his enemy. I note these facts merely as a matter of curiosity and to show how this new ape, from the very beginning, gave himself helplessly into our hands. We had supposed him to be guilty of race-treachery only, a bodily perversion which is, perhaps, a sin and not a crime—but the moment he spoke he went much farther. He accused himself of sedition from his own mouth. He spoke as follows:

“Since my arrest has given me an opportunity of speaking to higher apes for the first time in my life, I will speak what (perhaps unknown to you) has been in the minds of us who are lower in the

tree for hundreds of years. We think that there is no greater evil than the vast fruit slaughters. Now there could be no slaughter if our teeth and claws were not sharp, and they would not be sharp if we were not perpetually engaged in struggle. We believe that a crucial time has arrived in the evolution" (we pricked up our ears at that word) "of the ape. Our tails, that used to swirl us (as they waved above our heads) into bloodthirsty states of mind, are shortening; we have not shortened them ourselves by any act of will. If we apes will work to order our lives in a new way, the struggle will cease, no more great fruit slaughters will be necessary and everyone will have all the fruit he needs and can eat in peace in his appropriate place in the tree. For we do not think that even you in the higher branches for whom unconsciously we labour, really benefit by the great slaughters. Some of you are killed as thousands of us are, many of you are maimed and carry un-beautiful scars. From what we below hear of your private lives and talk in the upper branches, your privileges do not make you either sensible or happy."

We were ready to fall upon him after this blasphemous speech, but our oldest ape, steeped in the wisdom and slyness of his great age, silenced us. "And when there is a shortage of fruit for everyone in the tree, high and low alike?" he asked. "If our teeth and claws are not sharpened," replied the new ape, "we shall not want to attack other trees but, when we need fruit, we shall go to the others and instead of tearing them apart we shall talk to them, stroke them and persuade them. They, seeing how gentle our hands are, will like being stroked and will smile and coo in their pleasure; for, as all of us apes know from intimate experience, there is nothing more delightful than a gentle tickling and scratching—and then they will share their fruit with us."—"What a hope!" we laughed. And some cried with disgust, "That ape's a pansy!" But a shout went up from the lower branches where a mass of his supporters were gathered. "You'd better do as he says," the cry came, "or soon there will be none of us left to bring you your fruit." "Yes," said the leader, "another fruit robbery and there will be no more workers for you to steal from."

"Now," we whispered to our oldest ape on the highest branch, "now let us kill him."

"Remember," said the old one, "that he has followers. They are too many for us and we are unprepared."

This was true, so, reluctantly, we let the leader go and swing back down the branches to his own people.

After he had gone we gathered in conference in the upper branches. When we were seated, our oldest ape said: "No doubt to you there seems to be something new, startling and dangerous in the speech you have just heard. I expect you think it the speech of a revolutionary. So it is—but there's nothing new in that. From the beginning of time there have been revolutions, and what difference do they make? None whatever. Everything goes on afterwards exactly as it went on before. Do not worry therefore about revolutionaries. I have seen dozens of such people and with a little art they can be made to die very comfortably of their own enthusiasm. And, in one way, I agree with what that strange ape said. He said that violence is wasteful. It is—for to exterminate our own workers would mean that we would be without food or would have to go down out of our comfortable places in the tree and get it for ourselves. That would indeed be a calamity. No, I think if we wish to remove the danger from this particular movement we should support it."

"Support blasphemy and treachery!" we cried with indignation.

"Ah!" exclaimed the old ape wistfully. "There speaks the honest warrior. But I am old and political and it would seem to me a mistake to let all that enthusiasm get out of our hands. After our last great fruit robbery we are rather tired, you know, and enthusiasm is not easily come by again."

"But our tails!" we shouted.

"Your honour and your tails!" said our weary and ancient one. "I guarantee to show you such a display of tails wagging, curling, prehensile and triumphant as you have never seen before."

"Well, if your plan will safeguard our sacred tails and preserve us from evolution," we said, "there may be something in it. Tell us what it is."

"It is very simple," he said. "First of all we shall announce the end of all fruit robbery . . ."

"Impossible," we interrupted.

"It is never impossible to *announce* anything," he said. "I repeat we shall announce the end of all fruit robbery. But the lower ape is an emotional creature. It is useless to argue with him—indeed

we know that the free interchange of ideas in open argument is extremely dangerous, for the lower apes are hungry, and hunger sharpens the mind, just as it sharpens the claws. No, we must appeal to his emotions, for it is here that he is untrained and inexperienced. So when we announce the end of all fruit robbery we must perform an act which shall symbolize our intention. That is easy. Almost anything would do. The best, I think, would be merely to alter the date of the commemoration of our last robbery from the anniversary of its call to battle to the day on which it ended and when peace was declared. I'll lay you a hundred to one in pomegranates that you will see the tails wag on that day."

We who listened were doubtful of the success of a trick so simple and, moreover, we were disappointed not to have the opportunity of killing the rebel ape. But when we heard the enthusiasm in the lower branches, we realized that our oldest ape had judged rightly. Those short-tailed evolutionists were so diddled that they shouted for joy. "Peace!" "The end of all fruit robberies." "To each according to his needs"—we above heard their delirious cries and winked. And when the inquisitive pterodactyl came down to see what it was all about, we slapped him on the back and pulled his wings about merrily and nearly choked him with pomegranate seeds, which do not agree with him. "Cheer up, you're not extinct yet," we said. And even that cheerless reptile, though he said his nerves couldn't stand monkey tricks any more, had to smile.

And the ceremony took place. We appointed the day, and just before noon the yelling ceased and all the struggling and climbing. Just where they were, on whatever twig or branch, our apes coiled their tails and squatted in silence. The only movement was the blinking of our eyes, thousands of eyes in the hot rays of the sun. I do not know if you have ever seen a tree full of apes squatting in silence on their haunches. It is an impressive sight. There was our oldest ape on the topmost branch; a little beneath him was our circle of privileged ones, and below, thick in the descending hierarchy, were the others.

And then, before a minute had gone by, an event occurred which filled us with horror. The lengths to which blasphemy will go were revealed to us. Taking advantage of the stillness of the multitude, an ape leapt up the tree, from back to back, from

branch to branch, and burst through our unprepared ranks at the top. It was the leader to whom we had spoken.

"This is a fraud," he shouted. "You are pretending to commemorate peace when all the time you are planning greater robberies. You are not even silent. Listen to the grinding and sharpening of your claws and teeth."

It was, of course, our habit. We do it unconsciously.

Too startled for a moment to act, we hesitated. Then: "Lynch him. Kill him," cried the crowd with a sudden roar. We hesitated no more and at least a score of us leapt upon him. You would think we had an easy task. But there was extraordinary strength in that creature. He fought like a god, skilfully, and he had laid out half of our number with a science and ferocity such as we had never seen before our numbers overwhelmed him. Some spirit must have been in him and we still wonder, not without apprehension, if that spirit is lying asleep in his followers. However that may be, we threw him down at last upon the branch. Our oldest ape came down to look upon the panting creature and then what we saw made us gasp. He was lying on his face. There was a backside bare and hairless—he had no tail. No tail at all.

"It is man!" we cried. And our stomachs turned.

The Chestnut Tree

THE first firm I worked for was a leather merchants' in the south of London. To look at, their place was like a pair of muddy Methodist chapels with a jail attached; there were bars to the windows and, inside, the office smelled of feet, ink and boots. The name of the firm was Greenhythe & Co. They had been established for 150 years.

I was fifteen when my father took me there. I had never been to London before and, in the train, after the ticket collector had passed, we walked down the corridor to an empty first-class carriage, pulled down the blinds and then knelt in prayer. Afterwards we read the 91st Psalm. I had diarrhoea that morning because I was afraid.

When we came to the office we were shown at once to Mr Greenhythe's room.

"I want this boy to begin at the bottom of the ladder," my father said, speaking as a self-made man.

"Do you speak French, boy? *Parlez-vous français?*" said Mr Greenhythe. I could not answer. He was a very old man with long white hair which was the colour of vaseline at the roots. He had a hump on one shoulder and the head of a lion.

He then said there was a French proverb which went: "*C'est le premier pas qui coûte.*"

After that my father and Mr Greenhythe exchanged memories about the Wesleyan movement and the two men walked to the door. There was something noble, savage and prophet-like about Mr Greenhythe. But as he walked nimbly and cautiously to the door, with his bearded head sunk forward, his long arms hanging loosely, his old, cracked blue eyes raised and his boots hissing on the ground like a boxer's in the sawdust, I noticed he had the punched-in face of a fighter and wicked little teeth. Only people, he said, who had been recommended by the chapel and were known for their seriousness ever worked for the firm of Greenhythe & Co. And so it seemed. Ten clerks were bending over their ledgers as if over the Scriptures when I was led to the cashier's desk.

My work began at eight in the morning. First of all I went down

into the basement where the lavatory was to collect the pads used for copying the letters. The pads had been soaking all night. A smell of cigar smoke and scent came from the water-closet and the sound of a newspaper being unfolded. Then of singing. Out came Mr Cook, a fat bald man of sixty with a pair of nostrils like pink bubbles, and as fresh and perfumed as a flower; he had indeed a carnation in his buttonhole for he grew these plants in his garden. "La da, di da, hijorico," he sang and stood biting his finger-nails sulkily and scratching his womanish backside. Mr Cook opened the office every morning at half-past seven. Later, when we went upstairs and while I was filling the ink-wells, this old man would lift up his desk lid, peep over the top and shout "Ya! Ya! Ya!" and duck again. Then, once more, he sat biting the nails of his short dirty fingers.

At ten to nine the clerks began to arrive. When they had hung up their coats and hats they came to the fireplace and stood warming themselves. If there was no fire, they stood there all the same. Williams, the sandy, flat-footed one, with a sneering voice and misery in his skinny legs; Hodgkin, like a young actor, raising dark eyebrows as if he were looking at himself sideways in a mirror, and very stage-struck; Porter, the shipping clerk, with food stains on his waistcoat, the puffing father of a large family, who was often making mistakes in an authoritative way, sending bills of lading to the wrong ports, delivery orders to the wrong wharves, and who sat among the muddle of his papers like a hen having a dust-bath; Turpin, the limp dandy in patent shoes, lined and sick-looking, always with a smile stamped dead on his face, and smelling of cachous; then Sawston. Cook did not join them. Popping his head above his desk lid, he shouted out: "Ha ya! Ha ya!" And when they turned in condescension, some word like "Flambustigation". Sawston used to turn to him and tell him, in a dry, morose voice, to shut up. Cook put down lid and laughed till the tears ran down his face.

Then the outer door swung and in came Drake, the cashier and head of the office. All the clerks moved guiltily to their desks. Except Sawston. He glanced up at the clock. If it wanted two minutes or one minute of nine, he stayed where he was and watched Drake, a tall man with a gloomy voice like a chapel organ and grizzled hair and gold-rimmed glasses, come glowering towards him, clearing his throat.

"Good morning, Mr Drake," said Mr Sawston with loud effrontery. Drake looked at the clock; Sawston's small black eyes in his baldish, bullet head dared Mr Drake to have the courage to tell him to go to his desk. Mr Drake blew his nose and did not dare. "Um. Um. Umph." Mr Drake made a characteristic sigh on three notes, a noise famous in the office, and at once perfectly imitated by Mr Cook, who again lifted his desk lid, ducked his head and spluttered with laughter. Nine o'clock struck and slowly Mr Sawston walked to his desk, carefully cleaned his pens, wiped his ruler, sharpened his pencils, put a pile of invoices tidily on his blotter and began writing in his small girlish hand. Moodily Mr Drake gazed at the back of Mr Sawston's cheap grey suit and shook his head.

In Greenhythe's office the hours were long. At seven in the evening, when I left, Williams and Sawston were still at their books under the green shades of the lights, Porter the shipping clerk was sunk in his muddle; the partners, Mr Greenhythe's sons, had gone, but a bell which snapped outside his office and a weak bad light shining through the glass door showed that Mr Greenhythe was still working. On Saturdays we left early—four o'clock. Only Mr Cook enjoyed this régime. Leaving the office at eleven o'clock in the morning to take documents or large cheques to the City, he would waggle his rump as he went out, saying "Ya! Ya! dears!" and would spend the next few hours in the West End, sometimes at theatres for an act or two, sometimes in pubs and occasionally with girls. He came back, short-tempered, rosy and smelling of cigars.

One Monday when I had been four or five months in the firm, a woman came to the office counter. She was a tall, soft woman who wore a big floating hat with flowers in it and a blue serge coat and skirt. She had the bust of a draper's model. "I have an appointment with Mr Greenhythe," she said in a delicate, aloof and dreamy voice, looking down at me as if I were a fly on the counter. She was touching her nose affectingly with a handkerchief and I thought she was a royalty with a cold.

"What name, please?"

"Miss Browne," she said. "Browne with an 'e'."

After an hour she came out of Mr Greenhythe's room with Mr Drake as well and they led her to the street door. They were talking about Mr Greenhythe's Bible Class. A week later she came

again and then two days running. In his harmonium voice, Mr Drake murmured to Mr Porter that the firm were thinking of employing "a lady book-keeper".

The word "lady" fell like a boulder upon us. There were typists upstairs who arrived late and who never spoke to us; in the General Office there were no women at all.

"A leedy book-keepah!" called Mr Cook from his desk. "Ya ha!"

"Who's getting the sack?" said Williams.

"Who's getting the bird?" said Hodgkin and hummed an air from *La Bohème*.

"There are two," said Turpin, the tired sick young man who always knew everything. "She said she could not work in an office unless she were chaperoned by her sister."

"One for you, one for Mr Turpin," sneered Williams.

"Let us pray," called Mr Cook, hiding behind his desk lid.

Mr Drake was coming in. The clerks moved to their desks. The lines on Mr Turpin's face became deep seams. He was a martyr to the seduction of women. Women set him off, like a machine, against his will. They confided in him at once; just as Mr Drake confided to him the worries of a cashier, Mr Porter the muddles of his shipping, Mr Williams his troubles with his stomach, Mr Greenhythe the number of well-known preachers he had heard. The bold sick eyes of Mr Turpin, the sympathy of his manners, even his large ears which stuck out like comical microphones from his long head, the smile which was the tired smile of a man with a headache, brought men and women to him helplessly. He was a clever man from the flat, sing-song Midlands, but he had the long stupid face of an animal that is mindless and sad.

The two lady book-keepers arrived. Miss Browne the elder, whom we had seen, was like a swan and thought so herself. Her fair hair, she conveyed to you, was her glory. She was curving and sedate. With the sleepy smile of one lying on a feather bed in Paradise, with tiny grey eyes behind the pince-nez which sat on her nose, with the swell of long low breasts balanced by the swell of her dawdling rump, she moved swan-like to her desk. But not like a swan in the water; like a swan on land. She waddled. Her feet were planted obliquely. One would have said that they were webbed.

Behind her came the cygnet and chaperone, her sister and

protector. When I saw her I felt I had been struck in the heart by a stone. Mr Drake frowned and drummed his fingers, Mr Cook began biting his thumb-nail and leered in fury, Mr Porter became homely and paternal, Williams gave a scheming look at her legs, the stage-struck Hodgkin took a comb out of his pocket and ran it through his waved hair. Turpin and Sawston, who were on opposite sides of the same high, tilted desk, looked at each other fixedly. They looked as though they were trying to hypnotize each other. Taking small hard steps, her red lips pettishly drooping, her head in a cap of short black curls, her small breasts, her hips, her waist, set off by her silk dress, the sister of Miss Browne walked as if at any moment, if she shrugged her shoulders again, she could make her clothes fall off her. Her dress had some small design of red and white daisies. She looked at us tenderly and without innocence. She was as hard as a bird. When she spoke her voice was like a high cross voice in a garden.

Turpin put one leg down from his stool at once. He was about to introduce himself to the women; to walk between them with his hand just touching their waists. In such times his limpness went; he was decided. The dull buzz of his voice was the sound of the machine which had started inside him. But this time he sat back on his stool. Sawston was looking at him. Sawston's face was bloodless, as set and chalky as a clown's. The thick black brows were rigid and seemed to have been painted on, his eyes had a light so peremptory in them that one might have been looking into a pair of pistol barrels. Turpin was arrested by Sawston's eyes.

"O.K., laddie," Turpin said. A slight smile came to Sawston's face and he went on staring with indulgence at Turpin, whom he had silently conquered. Sawston's eyes appeared to be printing off thousands of words which Turpin read as rapidly as they were printed. Sawston folded his arms and his fists were clenched. His coat sleeves were short and his wrists were spidery with black hair. The smile became fainter, more ironically acid and delighted.

At the end of the morning Sawston, who had worked very little—and ordinarily he worked hard—but had sat staring defiantly at his own life, got down from his stool and walked back to the desk by the fireplace where Mr Drake ruled. Drake was tall. Sawston was a short man, wide for his size, and he wore collars

so low that they did not show above his jacket. This gave the impression that he was a collarless workman or was perhaps wearing a boxer's sweater. He was one of those men who have to shave twice a day and whose beard leaves a dark indigo stain like ink on a blotter. He was a curt man, blunt and independent.

"I think, Mr Drake," he said, "I think the younger Miss Browne had better work with me."

It was a demand, an order. Drake's jaws chewed, he blew into his moustache and was flustered. He tried to glower. He looked sideways up at the bars of the window, he made his harmonium noises. In the office he had the kind of authority which is despised but obeyed. But with Sawston Mr Drake could do nothing. He looked down resentfully at Sawston as if Sawston were a bear who had put him up a tree.

"Obviously," continued Sawston, "the girl hasn't got a brain in her head. I'll teach her."

Sawston had a cocky habit of clicking his tongue in his mouth when he was amused by his own self-possession. Having said this he walked back to his desk.

After lunch Sawston called across two rows of desks in a clear voice which was much louder than the tone which was thought suitable in this office:

"Miss Browne. Will you come over here, please."

She pouted and, affecting lack of interest, walked over to him. The black curls shook on her head, the small breasts pushed like nuts against her blouse. Her eyes were hot-blue with freckles on the pale skin under them and her clockwork voice said, "Yes, what do you want?"

"Call over these invoices," he said. She shrugged her rounded shoulders and held a pencil in her teeth. Sawston put his hand out and took the pencil out of her mouth. She was astonished. Sitting behind them, the elder Miss Browne saw this incident and awoke from her dream. She gazed at Sawston's shiny back with dislike.

We were afraid of Sawston, all of us. Without authority he suggested independent power. He was small, but our fear was physical. His walk, for example—he walked, not as some swaggerers did, who thought the place belonged to them, but as if he owned the precise yard of floor he happened to stand on. That was a vaster claim. His desk was his, not the firm's. His pens

were his. He sharpened *his* pencils. He made no mistakes in his books—well, once a year he might make a mistake and no one cared to mention it to him. He would admit it. This was inhuman and alarming; there was no one else in the building who did not make a scene about their mistakes and try to argue them on to someone else. A peculiar physical thing about him was the smallness of his wrists and his hands. Then of what were we afraid? His indifference. He was a man, Mr Turpin said admiringly, who would ruin himself. And Mr Turpin understood ruin.

Sometimes the two sisters sat together, sometimes the elder Miss Browne sat beside Mr Drake, calling over the big ledgers. High on their stools these two looked like a King and Queen. Mr Drake was respectful to her. She had a romantic, queenly air, sighed majestically or made little regal yawns behind her hands, sometimes stretching her arms to the back of her head and looking at us from a great, pale pillow of voluptuousness through her rimless glasses. No one, not even Mr Turpin, responded to the voluptuousness of the elder Miss Browne. She dropped her pens, but only Mr Drake grovelled on the floor for them. She watched him grovelling, thanked him with languor, spoke in the exhausted voice of a great hostess. Her favourite subject was, Woman.

When the sisters sat together was the time to attempt a flirtation with the younger one. The swan prevented it. She had a weary musical sarcasm:

“Have you nothing else to occupy yourself with, Mr Williams?”

One day she said:

“Heestings is a beautiful spot. One can have any kind of holiday there—quiet, noisy or musical.”

“Quiet with her about,” said Williams, digging his pen in the younger one’s ribs. The younger one astonished us, as pretty women do, by making a horrible face, squaring her mouth as if she were going to be sick and nodding at her sister. Delight! The two sisters detested each other. The great actress was jealous; the chaperone was venomous. Left alone together they bickered in refined voices.

“But you did, Hester, you said so yourself.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did. You said he said . . .”

“I said nothing of the sort.”

We rolled our eyes. Lovely! Lady book-keepers! The young one saw me listening and turned and smiled intimately at me. I went scarlet and when she spoke to me I could not answer. The elder sister looked over the young one's black curls at me and said remotely, "He's only a child." She pronounced it "charld".

Turpin and I sat opposite Sawston, and when the young one was with him we heard him reading the invoices and she copying or checking; but between the dates and the figures a low conversation was interpolated. Sitting side by side, they did not look at each other but looked across at Turpin and me, or at their books. But all the time, like the dry mutter of a telegraph, their talk went on.

Lady book-keepers! What happiness it was to see them arrive in the morning. The elder one, holding her hair at the back and tilting her flowery hat forward, came in with her coat flying and swayed as if drunk to the cloakroom, murmuring loudly to the young one, who came pattering trimly, crossly, shrugging her shoulders and snapping out words, behind.

"Ha ya," called Mr Cook. "Late again."

"And hot," said Mr Williams. Covering his mouth with his hand he added to the remark.

"Sisters, sisters," called Mr Cook when they came to their desk. "Do not quarrel." The young one ignored him and went to Sawston and started intense whispering.

"The big cow," said Sawston aloud one morning.

"What do you want?" he snapped at me, seeing I was listening. She smiled at me. She reached across to the library book I had on the desk and said:

"What are you reading?"

It was poetry, the poetical works of Sir Walter Scott. I was reading *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.

"Pooh," she said. "Dry."

Sawston looked quizzically at me.

"The boy's brain will bust," he said.

They both smiled, united by the same irony. I felt sad; I might have been their son.

But the cashier was watching our little group. "Press on, Mr Sawston," he moaned. "Press on! Boy. Come here." Colouring, I went to the side of his desk. He had his pen longways in his teeth and he went on turning the pages of his ledger.

"I do not want you to waste Miss Hester's time," he said. "We are very busy. How old are you?"

"Sixteen," I lied. I was fifteen years and two months old. I stood there waiting for his next remark. He went on turning the pages of his ledger. "Um. Um. Um," he sighed on his three notes. I had never been so near to this legendary noise before. It was like the rumination of humanity. A cage had been opened and out had come the humdrum rumour of the human race, the neutral, aimless, mindless rumble of the ape, digesting its inexplicable years on earth.

"Yes?" said Mr Drake, observing me again, surprised to see me still there. Then: "That's all." I went back in a sulk. My cheeks were hot. I scowled at Miss Hester Browne. She had been my undoing.

In the garden of the house where I lodged was a chestnut tree. In the morning when I left to catch my train the sky was clear and blue and against it the leaves of the tree hung down like the tongues of dark green dogs and the pink candles of blossom stood up from among them. I listened to the sound of my feet on the pavement. It was without will of mine that they touched the ground. There was a throbbing in my ears, so that I could hear only my own body, the clapping of my heart. I seemed to be flying, not walking. Would people in the train be uneasy because I was mad? The spirit and the flesh—two animals that were always in my head—were pulling me apart. The spirit was desire, the spirit was Hester Browne; the flesh had no desire, it clothed the torpor and the innumerable dreads of the mind and body.

My train went on to London, past the factories. Why were there no lakes, no mountains? For: "He, neglected and oppressed, wished to be with them and at rest." And why was great literature so boring? Into the pages of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* I had put a folded sheet of the *Windsor Magazine* with a poem printed on it.

*Stars of the heavens I love her,
Spread the glad news afar,*

it began. I was ashamed to think that terrible poem described my feelings better than anything in Scott.

"I should say you were an idealist," Mr Turpin said gravely to me while he opened the firm's letters. In the morning, when he was tired, he used to talk about life.

But now, Mr Drake had broken me. I was watched. Shame, vanity, spite thickened my head and bit my throat. The spirit and the flesh turned a somersault inside me, I tore up my cutting from the magazine; the flesh triumphed. I hated Hester Browne. My desire had become a poison. I saw the deadly nightshade shadows under her eyes and I was pleased by what Mr Turpin had said.

Turpin wore a small, mauve silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, and it was very long. An idealist! I bought myself a handkerchief and wore it like his. Williams shuffled over to me and, putting his hand over his mouth in his secretive way, bent towards me slyly so that I could smell the tobacco on his breath.

"Imitation," he sneered, "is the sincerest form of flattery."

Giving a sharp look back at me, he went off.

Now I hated Hester Browne I had the courage to observe her. She began to arrive after her sister and went breathless and damp-skinned to her desk. The pretty eyes were sticky with sleep as if she hadn't washed. To a connoisseur like Turpin this was very attractive. Her dress, the one with the small daisies, had scores of small creases in it. There was a week like this, her lips sulked and an exciting hay-like smell followed her in a warm current as she walked.

"Do you notice, Mr Turpin, anything about the atmosphere?" said Williams.

"Yes, I do," said Mr Turpin shortly. "Pleasanter than leather, isn't it?"

"A matter of opinion," leered Mr Williams. Up went the inevitable hand to his lips. "Perhaps a matter of experience."

There was a lift up to the top floor of the warehouse and sometimes I had to take messages there. I was waiting on the third floor when the lift went groaning past me. Inside were two people, a man and a woman. The man was limp and tall and his head was close to her looking down at her neck. She was the elder Miss Browne. She was talking violently and the man was Mr Turpin, who paid no attention to what she said but kept murmuring:

"You great big doll."

"He's a married man," she was saying. "Look at his face. It's a cruel face. The way he speaks to her even."

Two coats, a skirt, and a pair of trousers were carried upstairs out of my sight.

"I can be cruel too, duckie," Mr Turpin was saying as his patent shoes went up beyond me.

It was August. Mr Cook put his carnation in a glass of water and smelled it from time to time. He was sixty-two on the Bank Holiday and went up in an aeroplane. Mr Greenhythe's secretary, an elderly woman, who looked like Queen Victoria, put a pamphlet with the heading *Repent Ye* on our desks. Turpin read it through carefully. Then he lit his cigarette with it and said respectfully:

"I must go upstairs and thank her." Hodgkin took a clean sheet of paper and wrote with flourishes the words *The Marriage of Figaro*. Underneath he wrote in smaller letters: The Duke: Rupert Hodgkin. He looked in a pocket mirror and watched the movements of his mouth. "Press on, Mr Hodgkin," said Mr Drake. Mr Sawston and Hester Browne went out to lunch together, waiting for Mr Drake to go first.

On an afternoon in the middle of that week children in the street began shouting at a balloon in the sky. "Listen to those children," said Mr Porter tenderly, making a mistake in a weighing slip as he spoke. Between two and three was a slow hour; we all went to look at the balloon.

"Before the war," said Mr Drake, unbending, "there used to be a number of balloons." We did not notice the elder Miss Browne get down from her desk and go into Mr Greenhythe's room, and so we were astonished to see her coming out of it. The top part of her was gliding in a drowsy and smiling dream. She had the smile of one who has opened a bazaar, of a boa-constrictor that has fed.

Mr Drake pulled himself together.

"March 1," came Mr Drake's voice. "By goods, cash. £26, 17s. 1d." And her voice repeated, "£26, 17s. 1d."

"March 3," Mr Drake went on. "By goods, cash. £462, 16s. 3d. March 14," the voice was chanting the office litany. "Have you got March 14, Miss Browne? Goods, thirteen and a penny? Put a query against that."

He peered over Miss Browne to the page to see she had done this. As she wrote in the great ledger she was looking at the childish pink-and-white frock of her sister like a woman who is

thinking of lengthening the sleeves. She also looked ironically at the slack, shiny coat of Mr Sawston.

There was a bell over Mr Greenhythe's door and it snapped two or three times. It was my business to answer the bell and sometimes the old man used to ring it by mistake or forget what he wanted. I went into his office, which had a green light, for the sun-blind was down. His elderly secretary was just leaving the room. The old lion put down the telephone.

"Boy," he said breathlessly, "the *Alexandra Castle* has docked."

I stared at him. He looked at me suspiciously.

"Is your father well?" he asked.

I said he was.

He looked absently at his secretary.

"What was I thinking about?" he asked pathetically.

"Mr Sawston," she said.

"Ah, boy!" he barked at me, showing his little teeth. "Send Mr Sawston to me."

Mr Sawston went into Mr Greenhythe's room.

"Sawston's on the carpet," Williams said.

"Hi yi," said Cook, smelling his carnation. "What do I ca-ah? What do I ca-ah? I've got tickets for the Palladium."

Turpin leaned across to Hester Browne, who was looking resentfully towards Mr Greenhythe's door and straightening her shoulder straps.

"Keep on doing that," said Mr Turpin in a dead voice. "And I will bite your shoulders."

"I was thinking, Mr Drake," said the elder Miss Browne with a yawn, "what thousands of people there must be at the sea."

A pencil rolled down the desk and dropped on to the floor. "Boy," called a curt voice. "Pick up my pencil." It was Sawston. He was back again. Suddenly sitting at the desk. His eyebrows appeared to be stamped an inch higher on his forehead. His eyes seemed to be filled with points of flint. I picked up the pencil.

"The damned, impudent old man," he said so loudly that everyone looked up. He did not look at Hester Browne. She spoke to him.

"Shut up," he said very loudly.

He collected his invoice forms together, folded his blotter and

put those into his desk. Then he put away his pens and his round ruler.

The girl put her hand on his sleeve, but he lifted it off. Then he got down, looked round the office, taking in every detail of it, and after that walked to the cloakroom. He came out in his bowler-hat with his mackintosh over his shoulder. He stopped, lit a cigarette and threw the match-stick over the counter. We all stared. At three o'clock in the afternoon, smoking without permission, Mr Sawston walked out of the office.

A moan, indignant, and forlorn, like the sound of a ship's siren as it goes out with foreboding into the ruin of the sea, went up from Mr Drake.

"Mr Sawston!" called the appalled voice. Mr Sawston glanced back, showed the whites of his eyes and raised his bowler-hat. He was gone. Hester Browne jumped down, knocked her stool over and ran to the counter.

"Hetty," shouted her sister and came heavily after her. "Leave that man alone!"

She was in time to catch Hester by the sleeve.

"Stop it," shouted Hester and, turning like a rat, struck at the elder one's face.

"Ooh you, you . . . you," cried Miss Browne and hit out. The young one's sleeve tore, down went the elder's glasses.

"Just look at that," said Williams.

They were at each other's hair, screeching and shouting.

"You little tart! You little tart! You—you—you—little tart!" screamed Miss Browne.

The swing door on the counter flew open and Miss Browne fell through on to the floor.

We rushed to them. Their blouses were ripped, their hair was down, their faces were bleeding. The little one underneath was biting her sister's wrist, the big one was striking out and hitting the counter. They rolled.

"Miss Browne. Miss Hester," sobbed Mr Drake, shaking his pen at them and spattering them with ink. He bent to pull down Miss Browne's skirt, which was round her waist and exposing thighs whose sight astonished us.

At once the pair of them got free and flew at Mr Drake. This was beyond us. Mr Hodgkin stepped back, Mr Cook lowered his head and blushed, Mr Williams cried out.

"Remove them, remove them," pleaded Mr Drake. Mr Porter, eternally wrong, began to pull at Mr Drake. A loud slap startled us. Miss Hester had caught Mr Drake on the cheek. There was silence. And then we saw Mr Turpin. Sitting sideways on his stool, detached, interested and thoughtful, he was watching us.

"Mr Turpin!" Drake and Porter called out together. It was a cry to the expert. Sadly he got down from his stool and came to the two panting girls.

"Darlings . . ." he began and put his arms round their waists, but at this word the big one swooned and hung on him so that he was hardly able to support her. "I told Mr Greenhythe," she was gasping quietly. "Save her, save her. He's a married man."

But the little one had jumped away. Screeching, she escaped us and ran into the street to follow Mr Sawston. And that was the last we saw of either of them. The thing that struck us all dumb was that Mr Sawston had not fallen to the fear that hung over all of us: he had not been sacked. He had sacked himself.

The Evils of Spain

WE took our seats at the table. There were seven of us.

It was at one of those taverns in Madrid. The moment we sat down Julianio, the little hen-headed, red-lipped consumptive who was paying for the dinner and who laughed not with his mouth but by crinkling the skin round his eyes into scores of scratchy lines and showing his bony teeth—Juliano got up and said, "We are all badly placed." Fernando and Felix said, "No, we are not badly placed." And this started another argument shouting between the lot of us. We had been arguing all the way to the restaurant. The proprietor then offered a new table in a different way. Unanimously we said, "No," to settle the row; and when he brought the table and put it into place and laid a red-and-white check tablecloth on it, we sat down, stretched our legs and said, "Yes. This table is much better."

Before this we had called for Angel at his hotel. We shook his hand or slapped him on the back or embraced him and two hung on his arm as we walked down the street. "Ah, Angel, the rogue!" we said, giving him a squeeze. Our smooth Mediterranean Angel! "The uncle!" we said. "The old scoundrel." Angel smiled, lowering his black lashes in appreciation. Julianio gave him a prod in the ribs and asked him if he remembered, after all these years, that summer at Biarritz? When we had all been together? The only time we had all been together before? Julianio laughed by making his eyes wicked and expectant, like one Andalusian reminding another of the great joke they had had the day poor So-and-So fell down the stairs and broke his neck.

"The day you were nearly drowned," Julianio said.

Angel's complexion was the colour of white coffee; his hair, crinkled like a black fern, was parted in the middle, he was rich, soft-palmed and patient. He was the only well-dressed man among us, the suavest shouter. Now he sat next door but one to Julianio. Fernando was between them, Juan next to me and, at the end, Felix. They had put Caesar at the head of the table, because he was the oldest and the largest. Indeed at his age he found his weight tiring to the feet.

Caesar did not speak much. He gave his silent weight to the dinner, letting his head drop like someone falling asleep, and listening. To the noise we made his silence was a balance and he nodded all the time slowly, making everything true. Sometimes someone told some story about him and he listened to that, nodding and not disputing it.

But we were talking chiefly of that summer, the one when Angel (the old uncle!) had nearly been drowned. Then Juan, the stout, swarthy one, banged the table with his hairy hands and put on his horn-rimmed glasses. He was the smallest and most vehement of us, the one with the thickest neck and the deepest voice, his words like barrels rumbling in a cellar.

"Come on! Come on! Let's make up our minds! What are we going to eat? Eat! Eat!" he roared.

"Yes," we cried. "Drink! What are we going to drink?"

The proprietor, who was in his shirt sleeves and braces, said it was for us to decide. We could have anything we wanted. This started another argument. He stepped back a pace and put himself in an attitude of self-defence.

"Soup! Soup? Make up your minds about soup! Who wants soup?" bawled Juan.

"Red wine," some of us answered. And others, "Not red, white."

"Soup I said," shouted Juan. "Yes," we all shouted. "Soup."

"Ah," said Juan, shaking his head, in his slow miserable disappointed voice. "Nobody have any soup. I want some soup. Nobody soup," he said sadly to the proprietor.

Juliano was bouncing in his chair and saying, God he would never forget that summer when Angel was nearly drowned! When we had all been together. But Juan said Felix had not been there and we had to straighten that matter out. Juliano said:

"They carried him on to the beach, our little Angel on to the beach. And the beach superintendent came through the crowd and said, 'What's happening?' 'Nothing,' we said. 'A man knocked out.' 'Knocked out?' said the beach superintendent. 'Nothing,' we said. 'Drowned!' A lot of people left the crowd and ran about over the beach saying, 'A man has been drowned.' 'Drowned,' said the beach superintendent. Angel was lying in the middle of them all, unconscious, with water pouring out of his mouth."

"No! No!" shouted Fernando. "No. It wasn't like that."

"How do you mean, it wasn't like that?" cried Juliano. "I was there." He appealed to us, "I was there."

"Yes, you were there," we said.

"I *was* there. I was there bringing him in. You say it wasn't like that, but it was like that. We were all there." Juliano jumped protesting to his feet, flung back his coat from his defying chest. His waistcoat was very loose over his stomach, draughty.

"What happened was better than that," Fernando said.

"Ah," said Juliano, suddenly sitting down and grinning with his eyes at everyone, very pleased at his show.

"It was better," he said. "How better?"

Fernando was a man who waited for silence and his hour. Once getting possession of the conversation he never let it go, but held it in the long, soothing ecstasy of a pliable embrace. All day long he lay in bed in his room in Fuencarral with the shutters closed, recovering from the bout of the day before. He was preparing himself to appear in the evening, spruce, grey-haired and meaty under the deep black crescents of his eyebrows, his cheeks ripening like plums as the evening advanced, his blue eyes, which got bloodshot early, becoming mistier. He was a man who ripened and moistened. He talked his way through dinner into the night, his voice loosening, his eyes misting, his walk becoming slower and stealthier, acting every sentence, as if he were swaying through the exalted phase of inebriation. But it was an inebriation purely verbal; an exaltation of dramatic moments, refinements upon situations; and hour after hour passed until the dawn found him sodden in his own anecdotes, like a fruit in rum.

"What happened was," Fernando said, "that I was in the sea. And after a while I discovered Angel was in the sea. As you know, there is nothing more perilous than the sea, but with Angel in it the peril is tripled; and when I saw him I was preparing to get as far away as possible. But he was making faces in the water and soon he made such a face, so inhuman, so unnatural, I saw he was drowning. This did not surprise me for Angel is one of those men who, when he is in the sea, he drowns. There is some psychological antipathy. Now when I see a man drowning my instinct is to get away quickly. A man drowning is not a man. He is a lunatic. But a lunatic like Angel! But unfortunately he got me before I could get away. There he was," Fernando stood up and raised

his arm, confronting the proprietor of the restaurant, but staring right through that defensive man, "beating the water, diving, spluttering, choking, spitting, and, seeing he was drowning, for the man *was* drowning, caught hold of me, and we both went under. Angel was like a beast. He clung to me like seaweed. I, seeing this, awarded him a knock-out—zum—but as the tenacity of man increases with unconsciousness, Angel stuck to me like a limpet, and in saving myself there was no escape from saving him."

"That's true," said Angel, admiring his finger-nails. And Caesar nodded his head up and down twice, which made it true.

Juan then swung round and called out, "Eat! Food! Let us order. Let us eat. We haven't ordered. We do nothing but talk, not eat. I want to eat."

"Yes, come on," said Felix. "Eat. What's the fish?"

"The fish," said the proprietor, "is bacalao."

"Yes," everyone cried. "Bacalao, a good bacalao, a very good one. No, it must be good. No. I can't eat it unless it's good, very good *and* very good."

"No," we said. "Not fish. We don't want it."

"Seven bacalaos then?" said the proprietor.

But Fernando was still on his feet.

"And the beach inspector said, 'What's his name and address and has he any identity papers?' 'Man,' I said, 'he's in his bathing-dress. Where could he keep his papers?' And Juan said, 'Get a doctor. Don't stand there asking questions. Get a doctor.'"

"That's true," said Juan gloomily. "He wasn't dead."

"Get a doctor, that was it," Angel said.

"And they got a doctor and brought him round and got half the Bay of Biscay out of him, gallons of it. It astonished me that so much water could come out of a man."

"And then in the evening," Juliano leaped up and clipped the story out of Fernando's mouth, "Angel says to the proprietor of the hotel . . ."

Juan's head had sunk to his chest. His hands were over his ears.

"Eat," he bawled in a voice of despair so final that we all stopped talking and gazed at him with astonishment for a few moments. Then in sadness he turned to me appealing. "Can't we eat? I am empty."

". . . said to the proprietor of the hotel," Fernando grabbed the

tale back from Juliano, "who was rushing down the corridor with a face like a fish, 'I am the man who was drowned this morning.' And the proprietor who looked at Angel like a prawn, the proprietor said, said 'M'sieur, whether you were drowned or not drowned this morning you are about to be roasted. The hotel is fire.' "

"That's right," we said. "The hotel was on fire."

"I remember," said Felix. "It began in the kitchen."

"How in the kitchen?"

This then became the argument.

"The first time ever I heard it was in the kitchen."

"But no," said Angel, softly rising to claim his life story for himself. Juliano clapped his hands and bounced with joy. "It was not like that."

"But we were all there, Angel," Fernando said, but Angel, who spoke very rapidly, said:

"No and no! And the proof of it is. What was I wearing?" He challenged all of us. We paused.

"Tripe," said Juan to me, hopelessly wagging his head. "You like tripe? They do it well. Here! Phist!" he called the proprietor through the din. "Have you tripe, a good Basque tripe? No? What a pity! Can you get me some? Here! Listen," he shouted to the rest of the table. "Tripe," he shouted, but they were engrossed in Angel.

"Pyjamas," Fernando said. "When you are in bed you wear your pyjamas."

"Exactly, and they were not my pyjamas."

"You say the fire was not in the kitchen," shouted Fernando, "because the pyjamas you were wearing were not yours!" And we shouted back at Angel.

"They belonged to the Italian ambassador," said Angel, "the one who was with that beautiful Mexican girl."

Then Caesar, who, as I have said, was the oldest of us and sat at the head of the table, Caesar leaned his old big pale face forward and said in a hushed voice, putting out his hands like a blind man remembering:

"My God—but what a very beautiful woman she was," he said. "I remember her. I have never in my life," he said, speaking all his words slowly and with grave concern, "seen such a beautiful woman."

Fernando and Angel, who had been standing, sat down. We all looked in awe at the huge, old-shouldered Caesar with his big pale face and the pockets under his little grey eyes, who was speaking of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"She was there all that summer," Caesar said. "She was no longer young." He leaned forward with his hands on the table. "What must she have been when she was young?"

A beach, the green sea dancing down white upon it, that Mexican woman walking over the floor of a restaurant, the warm white houses, the night glossy black like the toe of a patent shoe, her hair black. We tried to think how many years ago this was. Brought by his voice to silence us, she was already fading.

The proprietor took his opportunity in our silence. "The bacalao is done in the Basque fashion with peppers and potatoes. Bring a bacalao," he snapped to a youth in the kitchen.

Suddenly Juan brought his fists on the table, pushed back his chair and beat his chest with one fist and then the other. He swore in his enormous voice by his private parts.

"It's eleven o'clock. Eat! For God's sake. Fernando stands there talking and talking and no one listens to anybody. It is one of the evils of Spain. Someone stop him. Eat."

We all woke up and glared with the defiance of the bewildered, rejecting everything he said. Then what he said to us penetrated. A wave roared over us and we were with him. We agreed with what he said. We all stood up and, by our private parts, swore that he was right. It was one of the evils of Spain.

The soup arrived. White wine arrived.

"I didn't order soup," some shouted.

"I said 'Red wine,' " others said.

"It is a mistake," the proprietor said. "I'll take it away." An argument started about this.

"No," we said. "Leave it. We want it." And then we said the soup was bad, and the wine was bad and everything he brought was bad, but the proprietor said the soup was good and the wine was good and we said in the end it was good. We told the proprietor the restaurant was good, but he said not very good, indeed bad. And then we asked Angel to explain about the pyjamas.

The Clerk's Tale

THERE were two railway stations in the town where I lived when I was a boy, the Junction and the East station, and from both of them the suburban trains went up to London. It was during the war, when I was sixteen, that I last used that line. I used to go from the East station, and the trains were very crowded. We all sat or stood, jammed against each other, and people rarely talked.

There was, nevertheless, one talker, if what he said can be called talk. He started with us at the East station. The moment he got into the compartment he would begin. "Must we have that window open?" he would say. Or, "Will you kindly move up and give me more room. Five passengers are allowed each side." Or, "Kindly sit on the opposite side, your smoke is annoying me." Or, if a woman opened the door, he would say, "This is a smoking compartment. Can't you go to the special compartment for ladies?" He hated women. All these things he planked down like a man throwing aside a spade in a temper. And after he said them he took off his glasses, showed his large, cold, snail-grey naked eyes, jerked back his shoulders and spread his fingers as if preparing to slap someone hard on the face. He was a hard-chinned, grey-haired man of fifty. People turned away to the window, raised their papers, looked more closely at their books and said nothing.

One day somebody said to me, "You should be sorry for that man. You should not mock him. One of his sons has been killed in the war. And the other has been wounded." I was silent. This conveyed little to me. I was sixteen. The world, the war—I hardly saw or heard of them. The mark of the war on that train meant nothing. I lived in a different world. I lived in a dream. Looking out of the carriage window, sunk in some book, watching the slow clock in the warehouse where I worked, I lived only for one thing in those days: that time should be urged on and the week pass.

So that it would be Sunday once more. For on Sunday, during one hour on Sunday morning, I saw Isabel Hertz. She was in my class at Sunday School, a girl who was half-Swedish, with hair as

yellow as thick sunflowers and candid eyes like blue pebbles of ice. Her throat, her lips which broke apart in piety when she sang the hymns, and her silk legs, intoxicated me. Once I fell down the Sunday School stairs when I heard her voice in the doorway below. When she spoke I thought of a crystal of snow falling on a warm hand and instantly melting; a particle of herself melted away with every word and passed with a sigh to Heaven. There, ardent but purified by her purity, I joined her in melodious, fleshless and speechless union. In one of those northern landscapes of snow, perhaps, where time is frozen in the sky, where sleigh-bells ring and there is the dry mutter of skates saying, "Inevitable, for ever. Inevitable, for ever," like our love, over iron lakes of ice.

It was a very small incident which had started my love for Isabel Hertz. It occurred one Sunday at the school. With her Bible on her lap she was sitting opposite to me, for I was afraid to sit next to her.

"Isabel, dear," the teacher said, "what is God?" Isabel, who always held her head a little to one side as if her small ears were listening to the spring sky, turned her head. She hesitated, as if waiting for the voice of Heaven; then she replied, "God is love."

I was looking at her, waiting for her to speak, and she caught my eye and smiled. A pain like hunger pinched my throat.

All that day I could eat nothing, but my mouth seemed to drink and eat the air because she, miles away, was breathing it. There was a laburnum tree in our garden, and I cut her initials, I.H., on the trunk and went to have a look at them every hour. I even went out after dark before I went to bed and struck a match to see them. I told my parents I had dropped a pencil there and was looking for it. I was awake all night and horses seemed to be galloping over my heart.

I longed to dream at night about Isabel Hertz, but this never happened. I was dreaming about her all day; but when the next Sunday and the next came I felt my body was covered with the garish tattoo of guilt and I could not speak. I never spoke to her. Once when she spoke to me, I choked.

Man cannot live by the spirit alone. It was about this time that, thinking always of the face and walk of Isabel Hertz, I started imagining things I could do with girls with round shoulders and protruding upper teeth. The uglier the better.

I used to follow them. There was a girl who got into the train at the next station one morning. She carried a small cardboard attaché-case which had the initials D.O.M. on it. At the London station, some nights after, I saw her again. The fact that I had now seen her twice, by accident, overruled everything. I dropped all other girls with protruding teeth and followed D.O.M. *Her* teeth stuck out like tusks.

D.O.M. was a dark, shabby, stumpy girl with thin legs and high scared shoulders. Her hollowed, sparrow-brown eyes and those teeth, which spread her lips and left her mouth open, gave her an expression of craving and hunger. The thing about her that moved me was the sad wideness of her white forehead. She was always with a tall friend and as they walked up the platform they bumped their hips against each other or pushed and pinched. They were always laughing and made people stare.

I used to follow in the evenings. My technique was like this. I got out at her station and gave her about fifty yards start and then I went after her. She and her friend went first down the station road; then they turned to the left and went up a long street of small villas. At the two corners I used to put on speed when she and her friend were out of sight; but when, racing round the corner, I found I was only ten yards behind them, I eased off and let them go ahead. At last they would turn inside a side street where, I supposed, she lived. There I left her and went on home. The idea of knowing exactly where D.O.M. lived was repugnant.

At first there was excitement in this pursuit; then dead but obliged boredom and finally the humiliation of secrecy. For the more I saw of D.O.M. the more I disliked her. I shuddered at the worn fur collar of her coat, her bad complexion, her giggle, the silly way in which she was always bumping into her friend, her bad, scraping walk which turned over the heel of her left shoe. All these things gave me a horror which I could not resist for I felt in my own mouth the hunger which I saw in hers. But once she had gone, there were freedom, weariness and relief. I went home exhausted. Once more I could dream freely about Isabel Hertz.

This went on into the summer. It was a bondage. I believed that D.O.M. did not know I followed her. But one evening towards the end of September something did happen which

changed the situation and altered my life. Just as we were all at the end of the long straight road of villas and D.O.M. was about to turn into her street and set me free, she gave a sudden twist to her shoulders, as a pomeranian does when it starts prancing and yapping, opened her mouth wide and put her tongue out at me three or four times. After this she put her hand to her throat and pretended to be sick. She knew. She had known all the time. I felt deep shame and anger. But this soon gave place to a decisive bombast and brutality. The next time I saw her I was determined to speak.

The following evening I walked past the barrier on to the platform of the London station and searched for D.O.M. She was at her usual place near the indicator. I was late in getting there and I had not reached it when the train came in. I saw her get into a compartment and I was going to join her but, at the last moment, I was afraid. I pretended to myself I would be more subtle. I would get into the next compartment. I opened the door and got in and, as I did so, I heard a voice shout: "Full up here." I saw the violent man. He was wearing a light grey pistol-coloured suit.

But the train moved. There was nothing to be done. He couldn't turn me out. I stayed at the window. The draught of the rushing train was blowing in my face. One of those yellow sunsets of the autumn, with cloud like the brown smoke that runs off paraffin flares in the street markets, was painted over the manure-coloured brick of London and the approaching pink brick of the suburbs. The train snuffled on. I looked out of the window and then I saw D.O.M. at the next one, not her face but the elbow of her green coat and the fur of her collar. She was standing too. I stared until the wind made my eyes sting. Presently her head showed. But she did not turn, the metals crossed like scissors under the train at the points outside the coming station. Someone got out of our compartment at this station and I went to take his place. In doing so I kicked the violent man's toe. He dropped his paper, stiffened his chin and muttered. I apologized and sat down.

At the next station another person got out and left the door open. "Close the door!" shouted the man. I was glad to curry favour. I stood up, closed the door and looked out. I saw her head again. I stared and stared and waited. She did not look my way. I went back to my place. But I couldn't stay there. I had to

get up again. She was there. She saw me. She affected not to see me. I was excited. I had entirely lost all sense of the people in the compartment. They were nothing but wagging and shaking sacks. I went back, got up again, a half-dozen times. I opened and closed the window, stepped across people's legs, gazed out, sometimes rewarded and sometimes disappointed. As I went to my seat once more I hardly heard the man opposite to me say:

"What the devil do you think you're doing, you young fool? Can't you sit still?"

"This is not your compartment," I said.

The wind in my eyes and the sight of D.O.M. at the window had given me defiance. All the brutality that lies under humiliation was ready.

"Perpetually getting up and treading on my feet," said the man.

"There is no need to lose your temper," I said. I was swept into another world, away from everything I had known. I felt the recklessness of a blasphemer in defying a man thirty years older than myself, a man with grey hair. I felt I had grown up ten years with a word.

"You dare talk to me like that," said the man, removing his pince-nez and showing me his naked grey eyes.

The other passengers looked at us in a stupor of displeasure.

"If you were my son," he said, "I'd thrash you within an inch of your life."

"Try," I said. "Go on." I felt about thirty. I suddenly felt I had fought in the war. "Why aren't you in the army, anyway?" I said. It was a phrase I had often heard.

The man threw down his paper, jumped up and was about to strike me when a passenger touched his arm.

"I shall call an inspector," he said.

An expression of bliss came over the faces of the others in the compartment. There was a worship of inspectors on our line.

"Call a dozen inspectors," shouted the man, still standing and threatening me. Before I knew what I was doing I gave him a push in the waistcoat, the train suddenly stopped with a jerk and he fell back into his seat. In our quarrel we had passed D.O.M.'s station where I always got out. We had arrived at the East station, the terminus.

This put me in a panic because I did not want to be seen

quarrelling in the town where my home was. The passengers had risen and one, a woman, was between me and the man. He was trying to get at me. I pushed and got out on to the platform first, but my enemy was on me. He tumbled out and hit hard. The blow hit my shoulder. And he grabbed my arm, too. He was savage and unguarded. I saw his mouth like a flattened rose and landed my knuckles on it. This knocked him into the crowd and his spit was on my hand.

I knew I was for it now and had not a chance against this man, and I was scared by what I had done. I got a burning blow on the ear that nearly knocked me senseless. I swung back at him and perhaps I hit him or one of the people who were trying to get between us and the barrier. It wasn't a fight.

"You young swine. You young hound." I heard his shouts. A passenger muddled the next swing of his arm and I caught him on the collar. The blow was not as wonderful to me as the first one; it made me feel dizzy. His spit on my hand had gone cold. I dodged away quickly, jumped on to a truck, climbed over the low fence and got down into the coal-yard. A number of people were arguing with the man. His hat had fallen off and had been kicked and he was holding it crumpled in his hand and shouting at the person who had trodden on it. Someone said, "Striking a boy like that!" and this made me feel heroic now I was safe. I walked away with the feeling that I was treading through flames and one side of my face seemed to be like a football. Then I felt horror at myself; and at the whole human race. I had struck a man whose son had been killed. I suddenly knew what the war was. I went home and was sick.

After this, I did not use the East station any more. I got up earlier and used the Junction. For two years I dared not go near the East station and I did not see D.O.M. again. I found a new girl on the new line and went out arm-in-arm with her. That had an unhappy ending, too—unhappy for the girl. None of this would have happened if Isabel Hertz had not known what God is.

The Aristocrat

IT was at two o'clock and after a good lunch that Mr Murgatroyd went into The Prince of Denmark and took his stand four-square and defensive against the bar. The time was seven minutes past two by the clock above the bottles, but by his gold watch, which he slipped out of its chamois case, it was two. He remarked upon this to Mrs Pierce, the publican, who was leaning with her fat forearms on the bar, musing like a cat; and she croaked out a long story about her husband winding up the clock on Saturday nights. The usual people were on the bench in the small bar, crowded, cheerful, and comfortable, Mr Sanders with a red carnation in his buttonhole, squeezing his little legs together with glee, like a house-fly in the sun, in the midst of three women and not sitting next to his wife. They all heard the conversation with Mrs Pierce and they heard her say:

"Bit of an 'eat wave isn't it, Mr Murgatroyd?" nodding to the first flakes of March snow in the street.

To this Mr Sanders added his news:

"Couple of cases of sunstroke in the Theobald's Road they tell me."

The presence of Mr Murgatroyd brought out Mr Sanders's wit. He was a dogged little man with a waxed moustache and tobacco-stained fingers, one to nudge the ladies in the ribs with his sharp elbows, a jumping cracker at three-ten a week in the provision trade. And bald.

Mr Murgatroyd was wearing a smart, new grey flannel suit. A pair of yellow gloves drooped in one hand like the most elegant banana-skins. He was a shy and important man. His eloquence was in the breadth of his shoulders, in the thick pink of his face after the first drink, in the full-moon expansion of his stomach under the smooth waistcoat and in the polish of his shoes. Mrs Sanders, a woman pushed to the outskirts of everything and sitting on the extreme edge of the bench, was ashamed of her wriggling husband when Mr Murgatroyd, blue-eyed, shy and impressive, stood with his lids lowered, gazing at the floor, secure and silent in his substance. The young Jewess who was always

there on Saturday afternoon got up and opened her fur coat when Mr Murgatroyd came in. She rested one hand on her hip, gave a long look into the mirror and began walking up and down, almost touching Mr Murgatroyd when she turned. Mr Murgatroyd lowered his eyes when she came, rolling her hips, humming and laughing towards him.

It was Mr Sanders's round. Mr Murgatroyd took a deep drink, faced the eyes of the dancing Jewess for a second, and then, as the beer sank down in him, grew heavy in the head, solid in his silence and vague in his vision.

It was at this moment when they were busy with their glasses, all talking at once, when Mr Murgatroyd unbuttoned his new coat and was easing out his disclaiming stomach and when the Jewess gave it a tap on the fourth button, with the words: "What you got in there, Mr Murgatroyd?"—it was at this moment that a stranger came into the bar. He was a tall, white-haired man and was among them just as Mr Sanders was pulling the money out of his pocket. Mr Sanders was bobbing about, standing in his way.

"Jim," whispered Mrs Sanders, anxiously leaning across to pull her husband's coat-tails. "There's a gentleman wants to get past."

"Excuse me, mister," said Mr Sanders, holding a full glass in each hand and abashed by the height of the stranger. A quiet, slightly wavering voice replied and the stranger walked past them to the bar.

"A beer, if you please," he said. He turned round, and all talk stopped. They saw the old man looking at them, counting them, giving each one of them a fine, quick calculating stab of his eyes. There were wet points of thawed snow on his long shabby green overcoat. Without a word he took his glass and walked slowly over to the mirror and put his glass down on the shelf. They watched him. His clothes were worn but they were carefully kept.

One hand was fidgeting in his overcoat pocket as he stood. He was an old man; he might have been seventy, even seventy-

five. He was thin, rigid and austere, a soldierly old man with quick crafty eyes. His lips were pared away to two thin, stiff lines, he carried his chin high like a sentry. His nose was lean and aquiline and he wore a long, carefully clipped moustache which curled with a military flourish. It was the alertness of the grey threadbare eyes of the old man and something supple and gentle in him that silenced everyone.

Mr Murgatroyd lowered his eyes and studied the old man's clothes. They were old and respectable. Mr Sanders was silenced by the aristocratic curve, the disciplined richness of that white moustache. Mrs Tagg jostled her various selves together within her corsets and stared. Mrs Sanders timidly admired. The Jewess stood yielding, softening her gaiety before his white age.

"Cold day," said the old man to them all. They were all surprised. Only the Jewess and Mrs Tagg murmured a reply.

Although he stood still, he was a restless old man. He moved his feet a little as he stood, and one of his hands was continually fingering something hidden in his pocket. Everybody noted this. Then his eyes moved in soft, darting glances at them all, so that they shifted their eyes. By those razor-cut glances he seemed to observe not their faces but things on their persons. Mr Sanders straightened his carnation after one of these looks and Mrs Tagg felt for her black beads. When he turned to Mr Murgatroyd he looked straight into the middle of Mr Murgatroyd's fine grey flannel stomach. Mr Murgatroyd leaned back rather more defensively against the bar; then he relented; being a very shy man, he could not resist the chance of a conversation when someone had got over the first difficulties.

"Was it snowing still?" Mr Murgatroyd asked.

"It was," said the old man.

Mr Murgatroyd wagged his head impressively.

"This wind finds out all your weak spots," said the old man. There was a movement of sympathy; he drew himself up with dignity to repel it.

Then the old man, with some deliberation, opened his overcoat and he was seen to be even thinner than he had at first appeared. His long hand went into the pocket of his carefully darned jacket and he drew out something which amazed them all.

It was a very large green silk handkerchief with a brilliant pattern of red and yellow suns on it, rich, exotic and expensive.

Mrs Tagg reckoned out the price at once. He let the handkerchief fall to its full length and caught it with his other hand. He gave it a small shake and gathered it up, clutching it tightly and watching it spring out and open like a gorgeous flower. Mr Sanders had expected to see it lifted straight to the beads of foam on the old man's fine moustache; but now he was playing with it, showing it off, conjuring with its brilliant lightness in the snow darkness of the bar. Would it fall to the dirty floor?

But the old man did not let it fall. He lightly touched his moustache with it and put it not into the inner pocket, but into the outside pocket of his overcoat. It hung out and Mr Murgatroyd looked down his own chest and gave a touch to his own handkerchief in his breast pocket. The old man took one of his economical drinks and then smiled a friendly, faintly triumphant smile.

Mrs Tagg smiled back at him. She was gazing at the handkerchief hanging far out of the pocket.

"Mind you don't drop that handkerchief of yours," said Mr Murgatroyd with great difficulty.

The old man, still smiling, drew back before this friendliness and straightened himself.

"You don't want to lose a nice one like that," said Mrs Tagg.

The old man surveyed them all and murmured something impatiently as if resenting interference. Rebuked, they watched. Presently, eyeing them all, he drew out of his other pocket the thing he had been fingering for so long. It was a short smooth stick about a foot long, like a wooden whistle.

It was not a whistle, but merely a stick. He took it out and ran it through his hands, smoothing it and stroking it, and with every touch his thin, stiff hands seemed to become lighter and softer and more pliable. He passed the stick from one hand to the other, sometimes holding it only between the tips of his two forefingers. The Jewess came forward to watch this.

"Nice bit of wood," said Mr Murgatroyd enquiringly.

"Uh," grinned the old man and then with a severe look put the stick back in his pocket. There was disappointment in the wondering eyes of Mrs Sanders. But the old man was fumbling and muttering:

"Yes, yes," and went on fumbling.

"Your handkerchief is in the other pocket," said Mr Sanders eagerly. The Jewess looked admiringly at Mr Sanders for being so quick to read her thoughts.

"I know," said the old man, giving him a severe glance, and still fumbling and frowning now with irritation.

Mr Murgatroyd expanded and said with amusement:

"Lost something?"

The old man looked round sharply.

"Have you got a sixpence?" he jerked.

Mr Murgatroyd's smile died in his soul but remained fixed on his face. He coloured. He moved his lips. He concealed a swallow. He leaned farther back against the counter. Everyone was watching the crisis in Mr Murgatroyd.

"I want a sixpence," said the old man and appealed to the others. "A sixpence," he said quickly. And at the same time he drew out the brilliant handkerchief and caught it with the other hand.

"I'll show you something. I'll show you what I can do with this handkerchief."

His whole manner had changed. He had become sharp and assertive.

The Jewess saw it at once. Her eyes woke up.

"You are going to do a trick," she said.

He looked at her with contempt and a smile on the tail of it.

"A conjuring trick?" asked Mr Murgatroyd, widening his eyes. "What are you going to do? Sixpence and a handkerchief?" he said deprecatingly.

"You know it?" said the old man.

"Everyone knows it. Everyone sees it. The vanishing sixpence."

"There's nothing new in that," laughed Mr Sanders. "Eh, ma?" he said.

They all laughed. God, the old man was a conjurer. Mrs Pierce, without unfolding her arms, slid them farther down the bar. The old man's eyes glittered.

"I'll bet you a tanner," said the old man, "you don't see it." And he stared full and unanswerably at Mr Murgatroyd. Mr Murgatroyd stared back with all his might. He entrenched himself against the counter. Mrs Pierce stepped nearer on her side

and he entrenched himself against the support of Mrs Pierce and the bar. He went very red and a mist came into his eyes.

"You want my sixpence," he said in a stupor, strenuously defending himself.

"No, I'll make a bet," the old man said, "with anyone." He snapped his fingers at them all. "You'll get it back," he said softly, smiling. They were ashamed of their suspicions. They gazed with command at Mr Murgatroyd hemmed in against the bar. He was obliged to hand the old man a sixpence.

The old man looked at the sixpence on the pink palm of Mr Murgatroyd's hand. Very reluctantly he took it and held it in his fingers.

"It's a funny thing," he said, "but you see all kinds of handkerchief tricks, but no one sees this."

"Let's see it," interrupted Mr Murgatroyd and was frowned on for interrupting.

"Some of these men you see on the halls are quick." He chattered away and he told them of ways of doing the trick, ways of folding the handkerchief and of concealing the coin.

"There, hold it a minute," he said, giving the sixpence back to Mr Murgatroyd to the astonishment of all. And his fingers captivated them with the play of his handkerchief as he illustrated his points.

They all leaned forward.

"Well, let's see it," said Mr Murgatroyd from his defence. But the old man went on talking. And then he insisted on Mr Murgatroyd holding the handkerchief. The Jewess came forward and wanted to hold it too.

"Now watch," said the old man. And he took back the sixpence and placed it in the handkerchief and began to knot it in. Mr Murgatroyd held one end of the handkerchief while the old man got to work with both his nimble hands. He folded and knotted. He stopped to explain.

"Get on with it," said Mr Sanders.

"Shut up. You watch," said Mrs Tagg, sitting vast in nervous judgment.

"Well, there you are," said the old man. "The sixpence is in there, isn't it? You saw me put it in."

"I saw it," said Mr Murgatroyd very hot.

"It was his sixpence, he ought to know," said Mr Sanders.

The old man smiled along his lips. Mrs Sanders gazed sadly at her husband. The Jewess watched like a jackdaw for brightness.

"Feel it," said the old man.

Reluctantly, ashamed of suspicion, Mr Murgatroyd put out his hand. He could feel the hard round coin.

"It's there," he said to the others.

"Oh!" said the old man coldly, whipping the handkerchief open.

It was empty. There was no sixpence. The beautiful rich, green handkerchief with the yellow suns on it waved. Mrs Sanders was glad the poor old gentleman had a beautiful silk handkerchief.

"There!" said Mrs Pierce gloomily from the bar.

"That's done it," said Mr Sanders, screwing up his legs.

Mrs Tagg made more room for herself on the bench and then breathed deeply.

"A man who can do that," she frowned, "is a clever man."

"He had it in his hand all the time," said the Jewess.

The old man showed her his empty hands.

"Eh?" said the old man, faintly smiling. He began absently to fold up the handkerchief with his rippling hands which never ceased in their movements.

"Yes," said Mr Murgatroyd, rather proud of himself. "Yes," he said, shaking his head.

The handkerchief was whipped open again and there was the sixpence in it.

"You see!" Mrs Pierce murmured miserably.

They all began to talk at once.

The old man put his handkerchief back into his pocket and reached for his drink. He listened to the arguments and explanations.

"Oh, I must give you your sixpence," he said to Mr Murgatroyd. But Mr Murgatroyd recoiled. He was shamed by the sight of his coin. He thickened with generosity, his skin gleamed with admiration and the flush of his second pint. He felt he was the leader of a delegation, the master of ceremonies, the mayor of a town; but too much of a man of the world to show it crudely. He condescended in a knowing, intimate, chatty way with the sparse of speech old man.

"No, that's your sixpence," said Mr Murgatroyd casually.

"You won it."

"Oh . . .," the old man hesitated.

"Yes, go on. You take it. Go on," said Mrs Tagg firmly, shaking her head. Mrs Tagg was proud of being out for justice.

The old man drew the stick from his pocket and began sliding it to and fro and shyly pocketed the sixpence. Mrs Sanders smiled wistfully and gladly at him when he did this.

"There's nothing in it," said the old man. "It's all a swindle. The quickness of the hand deceiving the eye and human nature," he said. "Take the stick and tumbler trick." He picked up an empty glass and rammed the stick several times at the bottom of it. The third or fourth time it appeared to go through.

"Gawd," said Mr Sanders with admiration. "That's clever. See how he done that? Do it again! There now."

"Dear me. Look at that," said Mrs Tagg.

They all saw it. They all felt warm and intimate.

"There's a trick in everything," said the old man.

"A man with a brain can diddle anyone," said Mr Sanders, nodding intimately to the old man, whose eye faintly fluttered and then ignored him.

Somehow a ring had come into the old man's hand. The Jewess was the first to notice it.

"A ring and a stick," said the old man. "Get it off without moving your hands." He slid the ring up and down the stick and then slipped it off.

It was the maddening way of this old man to start a trick and then stop and talk and begin all over again.

Now he was off again and he got Mr Murgatroyd to hold one end of the stick, while he took out his handkerchief again. He covered the stick up. The ring was on it. The handkerchief in all its colours covered the stick and Mr Murgatroyd's hand was resting pressed against his waistcoat. The old man kept altering the position of Mr Murgatroyd's hand, pulling the stick away to show the ring was still on it, and then giving it back again.

"The chair trick now," he was saying. "They tie a man up to a chair with his arms behind his back. You can go up and see he's properly knotted, and yet he just steps out of it. What's the explanation? Trick knots."

"They're not real knots, then?" accused Mr Sanders.

"He's knotted up," said the old man.

"But not with real knots," said the Jewess.

"They're knots all right," said the old man. "He's got a couple of tapes up his sleeve coming out in slits in his coat."

They exclaimed. He was fidgeting all the time, straightening out his handkerchief. He even gave Mr Murgatroyd a tap in the ribs and said he was sorry. Mr Murgatroyd smiled pityingly at the poor fussy old conjurer with all his tricks. Suddenly the old man said "Look!" and whipped off the handkerchief. There was no ring on the stick.

"What are you drinking?" said Mr Murgatroyd with embarrassment.

The old man hesitated. "No, thank you," he said. "Not before my dinner. I haven't had my dinner yet."

"Oh, I see," murmured Mr Murgatroyd with embarrassment.

No dinner! What did he mean, no dinner? Did he mean he was earning his dinner? They were all very comfortable people with full stomachs. It was embarrassing to sit there full of food while an old man going on for seventy-five stood there empty, a fine old man like that. An aristocratic old man and nothing inside him. Mr and Mrs Sanders, they had had a stew. Mrs Tagg had had a nice bit of crab and a Guinness. Crab didn't agree with the Jewess. "It isn't that it repeats, but, you know, I know I've had it." So she had had spaghetti. As for Mr Murgatroyd, he had been built up on steak and two vegetables and raisin roll. They were diffusing their goodness in him.

All were touched when the old man gave a short bow and murmured in his quavering dignified voice that an old soldier would be grateful for a copper or two. His quick eyes watched their hands.

A handsome old man like that doing this for a living! Mrs Sanders signalled to her husband. The Jewess opened her handbag.

"An old soldier did you say?" asked Mrs Tagg on behalf of everyone.

"The East Kents," said the old man, straightening.

"The Buffs!" she smiled with sudden reminiscent warmth, imperiousness vanishing in a glitter of long-forgotten gaiety.

"Yes, that's it. The Buffs," the old man repeated mechanically. His thin, long, clever, hungry hands!

"Steady, the Buffs!" exclaimed Mrs Tagg, with a shake of her head and tears of pleasure in her eyes.

"Oh, ah . . ." murmured the old man.

"Chatham?" said Mr Sanders. "Nice place. The Bells, Chatham. Know that?"

"Twenty-five years' service," said the old man. "Not so young now."

"I could tell you was an old soldier," said Mrs Tagg with pride.

He stood there talking to them as he put the few coppers in his pocket. Mr Sanders began to remember the good old days at Chatham during the war.

"I was talking about the Boer War," said the old man.

Mrs Sanders raised her head high in shame for her husband. She was proud of the heroic old man.

"Well," he said, after a while. "I suppose I'd better be moving along to my dinner."

They were sad. But they understood. They realized he was a hungry old man.

"Good day, and I thank you," he said.

Mr Murgatroyd put out his hand. The old man was surprised by this handshake. It was the only time he had been taken aback. Raising his hat, he went slowly out of the bar. The swing door bumped after him and Mrs Pierce raised herself from the counter and went to the window to see the tall, upright figure walk away. When she came back she said: "It's snowing hard now."

They all sat in silence staring into the tops of their glasses. Except the Jewess, who took off her hat and combed her hair by the mirror. There on the mantelpiece was the froth-laced glass the old man had used.

"Well, well," said Mr Murgatroyd uncomfortably. He relaxed from the slanting position into which he had recoiled before the old man. "He gets a living," said Mr Murgatroyd.

There was a long silence. The bar seemed to be much darker now that the old man had gone. They were thinking about Mr Murgatroyd's words. Mr Murgatroyd was all right, he had a new suit of clothes, gloves in his hand, a fountain-pen in his pocket, a car outside and a new Trilby hat. But everyone had to get a living. Mrs Sanders moved to the end of the bench and pulled up the collar of her coat with a shiver.

"Hunger," said Mrs Sanders in her timid voice. "That's the worst thing."

They all looked at her with curiosity and reproof for speaking that word.

And that uncomfortable word reminded Mr Murgatroyd of something. His shyness and importance were moving inside him. It was his round.

"What's everyone having?" he said at last, looking away up at the clock among the bottles. Mrs Pierce looked up, too.

"Guinness, ma'am. Time for another, I think. Your clock's fast, Mrs Pierce. . . ."

And his hand went down his waistcoat for his watch. Down and down it went. And as it went down he seemed to feel a nudge in his stomach and a look of consternation came on his face. The watch was not there. His hand dug in his other pocket.

"Well, I'm . . ." he said aloud. The watch had gone.

His eyes popped wide and hard, his jaw dropped. He went very pale and then flushed to the colour of a beetroot.

"Here," he blurted out, starting from the counter. "My watch. It was here. I know it was. It's gone. You saw it, Mrs Pierce. You saw me take it out. It's gone. That artful old swine has pinched my watch!"

He glared at them all.

"Where is he?" he shouted. "Which way did he go? Look for him! Of all the thieves. . . ."

Unable to do more because of the vast heaving and of his rage, Mr Murgatroyd looked as though he would burst.

The Voice

A MESSAGE came from the rescue party, who straightened up and leaned on their spades in the rubble. The policeman said to the crowd: "Everyone keep quiet for five minutes. No talking, please. They're trying to hear where he is."

The silent crowd raised their faces and looked across the ropes to the church, which, now it was destroyed, broke the line of the street like a decayed tooth. The bomb had brought down the front wall and the roof, the balcony had capsized. Freakishly untouched, the hymnboard still announced the previous Sunday's hymns.

A small wind blew a smell of smouldering cloth across people's noses from another street where there was another scene like this. A bus roared by and heads turned in passive anger until the sound of the engine had gone. People blinked as a pigeon flew from a roof and crossed the building like an omen of release. There was dead quietness again. Presently a murmuring sound was heard by the rescue party. The man buried under the debris was singing again.

At first difficult to hear, soon a tune became definite. Two of the rescuers took up their shovels and shouted down to encourage the buried man, and the voice became stronger and louder. Words became clear. The leader of the rescue party held back the others, and those who were near strained to hear. Then the words were unmistakable:

*"Oh Thou whose Voice the waters heard,
And hushed their raging at Thy Word."*

The buried man was singing a hymn.

A clergyman was standing with the warden in the middle of the ruined church.

"That's Mr Morgan all right," the warden said. "He could sing. He got silver medals for it."

The Rev. Frank Lewis frowned.

"Gold, I shouldn't wonder," said Mr Lewis dryly. Now he knew Morgan was alive he said: "What the devil's he doing in

there? How did he get in? I locked up at eight o'clock last night myself."

Lewis was a wiry, middle-aged man, but the white dust on his hair and his eye-lashes, and the way he kept licking the dust off his dry lips, moving his jaws all the time, gave him the monkeyish, testy and suspicious air of an old man. He had been up all night on rescue work in the raid and he was tired out. The last straw was to find the church had gone and that Morgan, the so-called Rev. Morgan, was buried under it.

The rescue workers were digging again. There was a wide hole now and a man was down in it filling a basket with his hands. The dust rose like smoke from the hole as he worked.

The voice had not stopped singing. It went on, rich, virile, masculine, from verse to verse of the hymn. Shooting up like a stem through the rubbish the voice seemed to rise and branch out powerfully, luxuriantly and even theatrically, like a tree, until everything was in its shade. It was a shade that came towards one like dark arms.

"All the Welsh can sing," the warden said. Then he remembered that Lewis was Welsh also. "Not that I've got anything against the Welsh," the warden said.

The scandal of it, Lewis was thinking. Must he sing so loud, must he advertise himself? I locked up myself last night. How the devil did he get in? And he really meant: How did the devil get in?

To Lewis, Morgan was the nearest human thing to the devil. He could never pass that purple-gowned figure, sauntering like a cardinal in his skull cap on the sunny side of the street, without a shudder of distaste and derision. An unfrocked priest, his predecessor in the church, Morgan ought in strict justice to have been in prison, and would have been but for the indulgence of the bishop. But this did not prevent the old man with the saintly white head and the eyes half-closed by the worldly juices of food and wine from walking about dressed in his vestments, like an actor walking in the sun of his own vanity, a hook-nosed satyr, a he-goat significant to servant girls, the crony of the public-house, the chaser of bookmakers, the smoker of cigars. It was terrible, but it was just that the bomb had buried him; only the malice of the Evil One would have thought of bringing the punishment of the sinner upon the church as well. And now, from the ruins,

the voice of the wicked man rose up in all the elaborate pride of art and evil.

Suddenly there was a moan from the sloping timber, slates began to skate down.

"Get out. It's going," shouted the warden.

The man who was digging struggled out of the hole as it bulged under the landslide. There was a dull crumble, the crashing and splitting of wood and then the sound of brick and dust tearing down below the water. Thick dust clouded over and choked them all. The rubble rocked like a cake-walk. Everyone rushed back and looked behind at the wreckage as if it were still alive. It remained still. They all stood there, frightened and suspicious. Presently one of the men with the shovel said, "The bloke's shut up."

Everyone stared stupidly. It was true. The man had stopped singing. The clergyman was the first to move. Gingerly he went to what was left of the hole and got down on his knees.

"Morgan!" he said, in a low voice.

Then he called out more loudly:

"Morgan!"

Getting no reply, Lewis began to scramble the rubble away with his hands.

"Morgan!" he shouted. "Can you hear?" He snatched a shovel from one of the men and began digging and shovelling the stuff away. He had stopped chewing and muttering. His expression had entirely changed. "Morgan!" he called. He dug for two feet and no one stopped him. They looked with bewilderment at the sudden frenzy of the small man grubbing like a monkey, spitting out the dust, filing down his nails. They saw the spade at last shoot through the old hole. He was down the hole widening it at once, letting himself down as he worked. He disappeared under a ledge made by the fallen timber.

The party above could do nothing. "Morgan," they heard him call. "It's Lewis. We're coming. Can you hear?" He shouted for an axe and presently they heard him smashing with it. He was scratching like a dog or a rabbit.

A voice like that to have stopped, to have gone! Lewis was thinking. How unbearable this silence was. A beautiful proud voice, the voice of a man, a voice like a tree, the soul of a man spreading in the air like the cedars of Lebanon. "Only one man

I have heard with a bass like that. Owen the Bank, at Newtown before the war. Morgan!" he shouted. "Sing! God will forgive you everything, only sing!"

One of the rescue party following behind the clergyman in the tunnel shouted back to his mates:

"I can't do nothing. This bleeder's blocking the gangway."

Half an hour Lewis worked in the tunnel. Then an extraordinary thing happened to him. The tunnel grew damp and its floor went as soft as clay to the touch. Suddenly his knees went through. There was a gap with a yard of cloth, the vestry curtain or the carpet at the communion rail was unwound and hanging through it. Lewis found himself looking down into the blackness of the crypt. He lay down and put his head and shoulders through the hole and felt about him until he found something solid again. The beams of the floor were tilted down into the crypt.

"Morgan. Are you there, man?" he called.

He listened to the echo of his voice. He was reminded of the time he had talked into a cistern when he was a boy. Then his heart jumped. A voice answered him out of the darkness from under the fallen floor. It was like the voice of a man lying comfortably and waking up from a snooze, a voice thick and sleepy.

"Who's that?" asked the voice.

"Morgan, man. It's Lewis. Are you hurt?" Tears pricked the dust in Lewis's eyes and his throat ached with anxiety as he spoke. Forgiveness and love were flowing out of him. From below the deep thick voice of Morgan came back.

"You've been a hell of a long time," it said. "I've damn near finished my whisky."

"Hell" was the word which changed Mr Lewis's mind. Hell was a real thing, a real place for him. He believed in it. When he read out the word "Hell" in the Scriptures he could see the flames rising as they rise out of the furnaces at Swansea. "Hell" was a professional and poetic word for Mr Lewis. A man who had been turned out of the Church had no right to use it. Strong language and strong drink, Mr Lewis hated both of them. The idea of whisky being in his church made his soul rise like an angered stomach. There was Morgan, insolent and comfortable,

lying (so he said) under the old altar-table, which was propping up the fallen floor, drinking a bottle of whisky.

"How did you get in?" Lewis said sharply, from the hole. "Were you in the church last night when I locked up?"

The old man sounded not as bold as he had been. He even sounded shifty when he replied, "I've got my key."

"*Your* key. I have the only key of the church. Where did you get a key?"

"My old key. I always had a key."

The man in the tunnel behind the clergyman crawled back up the tunnel to the daylight.

"O.K.," the man said. "He's got him. They're having a ruddy row."

"Reminds me of ferreting. I used to go ferreting with my old dad," said the policeman.

"You should have given that key up," said Mr Lewis. "Have you been in here before?"

"Yes, but I shan't come here again," said the old man.

There was the dribble of powdered rubble, pouring down like sand in an hour-glass, the ticking of the strained timber like the loud ticking of a clock.

Mr Lewis felt that at last after years he was face to face with the devil and the devil was trapped and caught. The tick-tock of the wood went on.

"Men have been risking their lives, working and digging for hours because of this," said Lewis. "I've ruined a suit of . . ."

The tick-tock had grown louder in the middle of the words. There was a sudden lurching and groaning of the floor, followed by a big heaving and splitting sound.

"It's going," said Morgan with detachment from below. "The table leg." The floor crashed down. The hole in the tunnel was torn wide and Lewis grabbed at the darkness until he caught a board. It swung him out and in a second he found himself hanging by both hands over the pit.

"I'm falling. Help me," shouted Lewis in terror. "Help me." There was no answer.

"O God," shouted Lewis, kicking for a foothold. "Morgan, are you there? Catch me. I'm going."

Then a groan like a snore came out of Lewis. He could hold no longer. He fell. He fell exactly two feet.

The sweat ran down his legs and caked on his face. He was as wet as a rat. He was on his hands and knees gasping. When he got his breath again he was afraid to raise his voice.

"Morgan," he said quietly, panting.

"Only one leg went," the old man said in a quiet grating voice. "The other three are all right."

Lewis lay panting on the floor. There was a long silence. "Haven't you ever been afraid before, Lewis?" Morgan said. Lewis had no breath to reply. "Haven't you ever felt rotten with fear," said the old man calmly, "like an old tree, infested and worm-eaten with it, soft as a rotten orange?"

"You were a fool to come down here after me. I wouldn't have done the same for you," Morgan said.

"You would," Lewis managed to say.

"I wouldn't," said the old man. "I'm afraid. I'm an old man, Lewis, and I can't stand it. I've been down here every night since the raids got bad."

Lewis listened to the voice. It was low with shame, it had the roughness of the earth, the kicked and trodden choking dust of Adam. The earth of Mr Lewis listened for the first time to the earth of Morgan. Coarsened and sordid and unlike the singing voice, the voice of Morgan was also gentle and fragmentary.

"When you stop feeling shaky," Morgan said, "you'd better sing. I'll do a bar, but I can't do much. The whisky's gone. Sing, Lewis. Even if they don't hear, it does you good. Take the tenor, Lewis."

Above in the daylight the look of pain went from the mouths of the rescue party, a grin came on the dusty lips of the warden.

"Hear it?" he said. "A ruddy Welsh choir!"

The Fly in the Ointment

IT was the dead hour of a November afternoon. Under the ceiling of level mud-coloured cloud, the latest office buildings of the city stood out alarmingly like new tombstones, among the mass of older buildings. And along the streets the few cars and the few people appeared and disappeared slowly as if they were not following the roadway or the pavement but some inner, personal route. Along the road to the main station, at intervals of two hundred yards or so, unemployed men and one or two beggars were dribbling slowly past the desert of public buildings to the next patch of shop fronts.

Presently a taxi stopped outside one of the underground stations and a man of thirty-five paid his fare and made off down one of the small streets.

Better not arrive in a taxi, he was thinking. The old man will wonder where I got the money.

He was going to see his father. It was his father's last day at his factory, the last day of thirty years' work and life among these streets, building a business out of nothing, and then, after a few years of prosperity, letting it go to pieces in a chafer of rumour, idleness, quarrels, accusations and, at last, bankruptcy.

Suddenly all the money quarrels of the family, which nagged in the young man's mind, had been dissolved. His dread of being involved in them vanished. He was overcome by the sadness of his father's situation. Thirty years of your life come to an end. I must see him. I must help him. All the same, knowing his father, he had paid off the taxi and walked the last quarter of a mile.

It was a shock to see the name of the firm, newly painted too, on the sign outside the factory and on the brass of the office entrance, newly polished. He pressed the bell at the office window inside and it was a long time before he heard footsteps cross the empty room and saw a shadow cloud the frosted glass of the window.

"It's Harold, Father," the young man said. The door was opened.

"Hullo, old chap. This is very nice of you, Harold," said the

old man shyly, stepping back from the door to let his son in, and lowering his pleased, blue eyes for a second's modesty.

"Naturally I had to come," said the son, shyly also. And then the father, filled out with assurance again and taking his son's arm, walked him across the floor of the empty workroom.

"Hardly recognize it, do you? When were you here last?" said the father.

This had been the machine-room, before the machines had gone. Through another door was what had been the showroom, where the son remembered seeing his father, then a dark-haired man, talking in a voice he had never heard before, a quick, bland voice, to his customers. Now there were only dust-lines left by the shelves on the white brick walls, and the marks of the showroom cupboards on the floor. The place looked large and light. There was no throb of machines, no hum of voices, no sound at all, now, but the echo of their steps on the empty floors. Already, though only a month bankrupt, the firm was becoming a ghost.

The two men walked towards the glass door of the office. They were both short. The father was well-dressed in an excellent navy-blue suit. He was a vigorous, broad man with a pleased impish smile. The sunburn shone through the clipped white hair of his head and he had the simple, trim, open-air look of a snow man. The son beside him was round-shouldered and shabby, a keen but anxious fellow in need of a hair-cut and going bald.

"Come in, Professor," said the father. This was an old family joke. He despised his son, who was, in fact, not a professor but a poorly paid lecturer at a provincial university.

"Come in," said the father, repeating himself, not with the impatience he used to have, but with the habit of age. "Come inside, into my office. If you can call it an office now," he apologized. "This used to be my room, do you remember, it used to be my office. Take a chair. We've still got a chair. The desk's gone, yes, that's gone, it was sold, fetched a good price—what was I saying?" he turned a bewildered look to his son. "The chair. I was saying they have to leave you a table and a chair. I was just going to have a cup of tea, old boy, but—pardon me," he apologized again, "I've only one cup. Things have been sold for the liquidators and they've cleaned out nearly everything. I found this cup and teapot upstairs in the foreman's room. Of course, he's gone, all the hands have gone, and when I looked around

just now to lock up before taking the keys to the agent when I hand over to-day, I saw this cup. Well, there it is. I've made it. Have a cup?"

"No, thanks," said the son, listening patiently to his father. "I have had my tea."

"You've had your tea? Go on. Why not have another?"

"No, really, thanks," said the son. "You drink it."

"Well," said the father, pouring out the tea and lifting the cup to his soft rosy face and blinking his eyes as he drank, "I feel badly about this. This is terrible. I feel really awful drinking this tea and you standing there watching me, but you say you've had yours—well, how are things with you? How are you? And how is Alice? Is she better? And the children? You know I've been thinking about you—you look worried. Haven't lost sixpence and found a shilling have you, because I wouldn't mind doing that?"

"I'm all right," the son said, smiling to hide his irritation. "I'm not worried about anything, I'm just worried about you. This—" he nodded with embarrassment to the dismantled show-room, the office from which even the calendars and wastepaper-basket had gone—"this—" what was the most tactful and sympathetic word to use?—"this is bad luck," he said.

"Bad luck?" said the old man sternly.

"I mean," stammered his son, "I heard about the creditors' meeting. I knew it was your last day—I thought I'd come along, I . . . to see how you were."

"Very sweet of you, old boy," said the old man with zest. "Very sweet. We've cleared everything up. They got most of the machines out to-day. I'm just locking up and handing over. Locking up is quite a business. There are so many keys. It's tiring, really. How many keys do you think there are to a place like this? You wouldn't believe it, if I told you."

"It must have been worrying," the son said.

"Worrying? You keep on using that word. I'm not worrying. Things are fine," said the old man, smiling aggressively. "I feel they're fine. I *know* they're fine."

"Well, you always were an optimist," smiled his son.

"Listen to me a moment. I want you to get this idea," said his father, his warm voice going dead and rancorous and his nostrils fidgiting. His eyes went hard, too. A different man was speaking, and even a different face; the son noticed for the first time that

like all big-faced men his father had two faces. There was the outer face like a soft warm and careless daub of innocent sealing-wax and inside it, as if thumbed there by a seal, was a much smaller one, babyish, shrewd, scared and hard. Now this little inner face had gone greenish and pale and dozens of little veins were broken on the nose and cheeks. The small, drained, purplish lips of this little face were speaking. The son leaned back instinctively to get just another inch away from this little face.

"Listen to this," the father said and leaned forward on the table as his son leaned back, holding his right fist up as if he had a hammer in his hand and was auctioning his life. "I am sixty-five. I don't know how long I shall live, but let me make this clear: if I were not an optimist I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't stay another minute." He paused, fixing his son's half-averted eyes to let the full meaning of his words bite home. "I've worked hard," the father went on. "For thirty years I built up this business from nothing. You wouldn't know it, you were a child, but many's the time coming down from the North I've slept in this office to be on the job early the next morning." He looked decided and experienced like a man of forty, but now he softened to sixty again. The ring in the hard voice began to soften into a faint whine and his thick nose sniffed. "I don't say I've always done right," he said. "You can't live your life from A to Z like that. And now I haven't a penny in the world. Not a cent. It's not easy at my time of life to begin again. What do you think I've got to live for? There's nothing holding me back. My boy, if I wasn't an optimist I'd go right out. I'd finish it." Suddenly the father smiled and the little face was drowned in a warm flood of triumphant smiles from the bigger face. He rested his hands on his waistcoat and that seemed to be smiling too, his easy coat smiling, his legs smiling and even winks of light on his shining shoes. Then he frowned.

"Your hair's going thin," he said. "You oughtn't to be losing your hair at your age. I don't want you to think I'm criticizing you, you're old enough to live your own life, but your hair you know—you ought to do something about it. If you used oil every day and rubbed it in with both hands, the thumbs and forefingers is what you want to use, it would be better. I'm often thinking about you and I don't want you to think I'm lecturing you, because I'm not, so don't get the idea this is a lecture, but I was

thinking, what you want, what we all want, I say this for myself as well as you, what we all want is ideas—big ideas. We go worrying along but you just want bigger and better ideas. You ought to think big. Take your case. You're a lecturer. I wouldn't be satisfied with lecturing to a small batch of people in a university town. I'd lecture the world. You know, you're always doing yourself injustice. We all do. Think big."

"Well," said his son, still smiling, but sharply. He was very angry. "One's enough in the family. You've thought big till you bust."

He didn't mean to say this, because he hadn't really the courage, but his pride was touched.

"I mean," said the son, hurriedly covering it up in a panic, "I'm not like you . . . I . . ."

"What did you say?" said the old man. "Don't say that." It was the smaller of the two faces speaking in a panic. "Don't say that. Don't use that expression. That's not a right idea. Don't you get a wrong idea about me. We paid sixpence in the pound," said the old man proudly.

The son began again, but his father stopped him.

"Do you know," said the bigger of his two faces, getting bigger as it spoke, "some of the oldest houses in the city are in Queer Street, some of the biggest firms in the country? I came up this morning with Mr Higgins, you remember Higgins? They're in liquidation. They are. Oh yes. And Moore, he's lost everything. He's got his chauffeur, but it's his wife's money. Did you see Beltman in the trade papers? Quarter of a million deficit. And how long are Prestons going to last?"

The big face smiled and overflowed on the smaller one. The whole train, the old man said, was practically packed with bankrupts every morning. Thousands had gone. Thousands? Tens of thousands. Some of the biggest men in the City were broke.

A small man himself, he was proud to be bankrupt with the big ones; it made him feel rich.

"You've got to realize, old boy," he said gravely, "the world's changing. You've got to move with the times."

The son was silent. The November sun put a few strains of light through the frosted window and the shadow of its bars and panes was weakly placed on the wall behind his father's head. Some of the light caught the tanned scalp that showed between

the white hair. So short the hair was that his father's ears protruded and, framed against that reflection of the window bars, the father suddenly took (to his son's fancy) the likeness of a convict in his cell and the son, startled, found himself asking: Were they telling the truth when they said the old man was a crook and that his balance sheets were cooked? What about that man they had to shut up at the meeting, the little man from Birmingham, in a mackintosh . . . ?

"There's a fly in this room," said the old man suddenly, looking up in the air and getting to his feet. "I'm sorry to interrupt what you were saying, but I can hear a fly. I must get it out."

"A fly?" said his son, listening.

"Yes, can't you hear it? It's peculiar how you can hear everything now the machines have stopped. It took me quite a time to get used to the silence. Can you see it, old chap? I can't stand flies, you never know where they've been. Excuse me one moment."

The old man pulled a duster out of a drawer.

"Forgive this interruption. I can't sit in a room with a fly in it," he said apologetically. They both stood up and listened. Certainly in the office was the small dying fizz of a fly, deceived beyond its strength by the autumn sun.

"Open the door, will you, old boy," said the old man with embarrassment. "I hate them."

The son opened the door and the fly flew into the light. The old man struck at it but it sailed away higher.

"There it is," he said, getting up on the chair. He struck again and the son struck too as the fly came down. The old man got on top of his table. An expression of disgust and fear was curled on his smaller face; and an expression of apology and weakness.

"Excuse me," he said again, looking up at the ceiling.

"If we leave the door open or open the window it will go," said the son.

"It may seem a fad to you," said the old man shyly. "I don't like flies. Ah, here it comes."

They missed it. They stood helplessly gaping up at the ceiling where the fly was buzzing in small circles round the cord of the electric light.

"I don't like them," the old man said.

The table creaked under his weight. The fly went on to the ceiling and stayed there. Unavailing the old man snapped the duster at it.

"Be careful," said the son. "Don't lose your balance."

The old man looked down. Suddenly he looked tired and old, his body began to sag and a look of weakness came on to his face.

"Give me a hand, old boy," the old man said in a shaky voice. He put a heavy hand on his son's shoulder and the son felt the great helpless weight of his father's body.

"Lean on me."

Very heavily and slowly the old man got cautiously down from the table to the chair. "Just a moment, old boy," said the old man. Then, after getting his breath, he got down from the chair to the floor.

"You all right?" his son asked.

"Yes, yes," said the old man out of breath. "It was only that fly. Do you know, you're actually more bald at the back than I thought. There's a patch there as big as my hand. I saw it just then. It gave me quite a shock. You really must do something about it. How are your teeth? Do you have any trouble with your teeth? That may have something to do with it. Hasn't Alice told you how bald you are?"

"You've been doing too much. You're worried," said the son, soft with repentance and sympathy. "Sit down. You've had a bad time."

"No, nothing," said the old man shyly, breathing rather hard. "A bit. Everyone's been very nice. They came in and shook hands. The staff came in. They all came in just to shake hands. They said, 'We wish you good luck.' "

The old man turned his head away. He actually wiped a tear from his eye. A glow of sympathy transported the younger man. He felt as though a sun had risen.

"You know—" the father said uneasily, flitting a glance at the fly on the ceiling as if he wanted the fly as well as his son to listen to what he was going to say—"you know," he said, "the world's all wrong. I've made my mistakes. I was thinking about it before you came. You know where I went wrong? You know where I made my mistake?"

The son's heart started to a panic of embarrassment. For heaven's sake, he wanted to shout, don't! Don't stir up the

whole business. Don't humiliate yourself before me. Don't start telling the truth. Don't oblige me to say we know all about it, that we have known for years the mess you've been in, that we've seen through the plausible stories you've spread, that we've known the people you've swindled.

"Money's been my trouble," said the old man. "I thought I needed money. That's one thing it's taught me. I've done with money. Absolutely done and finished with it. I never want to see another penny as long as I live. I don't want to see or hear of it. If you came in now and offered me a thousand pounds I should laugh at you. We deceive ourselves. We don't want the stuff. All I want now is just to go to a nice little cottage by the sea," the old man said. "I feel I need air, sun, life."

The son was appalled.

"You want money even for that," the son said irritably. "You want quite a lot of money to do that."

"Don't say I want money," the old man said vehemently. "Don't say it. When I walk out of this place to-night I'm going to walk into freedom. I am not going to think of money. You never know where it will come from. You may see something. You may meet a man. You never know. Did the children of Israel worry about money? No, they just went out and collected the manna. That's what I want to do."

The son was about to speak. The father stopped him.

"Money," the father said, "isn't necessary at all."

Now, like the harvest moon on full glow, the father's face shone up at his son.

"What I came round about was this," said the son awkwardly and dryly. "I'm not rich. None of us is. In fact, with things as they are we're all pretty shaky and we can't do anything. I wish I could, but I can't. But"—after the assured beginning he began to stammer and to crinkle his eyes timidly—"but the idea of your being—you know, well short of some immediate necessity, I mean—well, if it is ever a question of—well, to be frank, *cash*, I'd raise it somehow."

He coloured. He hated to admit his own poverty, he hated to offer charity to his father. He hated to sit there knowing the things he knew about him. He was ashamed to think how he, how they all dreaded having the gregarious, optimistic, extravagant, uncontrollable, disingenuous old man on their hands.

The son hated to feel he was being in some peculiar way which he could not understand, mean, cowardly and dishonest.

The father's sailing eyes came down and looked at his son's nervous, frowning face and slowly the dreaming look went from the father's face. Slowly the harvest moon came down from its rosy voyage. The little face suddenly became dominant within the outer folds of skin like a fox looking out of a hole of clay. He leaned forward brusquely on the table and somehow a silver-topped pencil was in his hand preparing to note something briskly on a writing-pad.

"Raise it?" said the old man sharply. "Why didn't you tell me before you could raise money? How can you raise it? Where? By when?"

The Night Worker

A MARRIAGE was in the air. In a week the boy's Cousin Gladys was going to be married. The boy sat in a corner of the room out of the way. Uncle Tom and Aunt Annie danced round the girl all day, pushing her this way, pulling her that; only a week to go and now—as the boy watched them in the little dark kitchen, out of the way of people's feet—the dance got fiercer, gayer, rougher. Do what you like, you're free already, they seemed to say to her. And then: You dare! You wait! You're still our daughter. Do as you're told. The boy watched them. He was seven. He did not know what a marriage was, and he gazed at them, expecting it to come into the room like a bird, or to be put on the table like a cake.

Aunt Annie stood at one end of the table with her back to the window, making a pie. He watched the mole move on her bony arm as she rolled the pastry.

"Hurry up with that sleeve, my girl. Haven't you taken out the tacking?"

"It's a fiddling job," said Gladys, holding up her needle.

"Here, give it us," said Aunt Annie, wiping the pastry off her fingers and snatching the needle. "Who's taking the Bible class on Sunday, then?"

"Not me," said Gladys.

Aunt Annie flopped the pastry over the pie-dish and the boy saw it hang in curtains over the edge, while his aunt stood straight looking down at the parting in Gladys's thick hair. Aunt Annie's grey hair was screwed back and in her bony face she had bold false teeth, so that she clucked when she talked and had the up and down smile of a skull. She had the good nature of a skeleton.

The boy was waiting for her to trim the pastry on the pie-dish. When she had done this she opened the oven door and a smell of hot cake came across the room. In came the boy's Uncle Tom, a sad, cake-eating man. How did a man so short come to marry a woman so tall? It must have been because Uncle Tom looked like a crouching animal who lived by making great jumps. He

was a carpenter, whose skin was the colour of chapel harmonium keys; a yellow, Chinese-looking man with split thumb-nails and a crinkled black beard, and he frightened because he never quite came into the room, but stood in the doorway, neither in nor out, with a hammer or a chisel in his hand.

"I done them stair-rods, my girl," he said. It was like a threat.

"I'll take them round," Gladys said.

"She's going at twelve," said Aunt Annie.

"Jim be there?" asked her father.

"Yes," said Aunt Annie. She seemed to the boy to have the power to make her tall teeth shine on the scowl of Uncle Tom, and to put the idea of springing on them all out of his head. "Jim'll be there. She's taking the boy."

Then Gladys laughed and, leaning down the table, put her soft arm round the boy's waist and rubbed her cheek in his hair.

"I'm taking my young man round. You'll look after me, won't you?" she said. One of their inexplicable fits of laughter started. Aunt Annie's teeth clucked and clicked. Uncle Tom went, "Ha, Ha, Ha," like a saw and lit a pipe.

"Only another week, Glad. It's just because of the neighbours," said Aunt Annie.

"Ay, my girl, neighbours talk," said Uncle Tom, and blew out violet smoke as if he were smoking the neighbours out.

The girl put on a prim, concealing expression. One minute she was a girl and the next a woman, then a girl again.

"Stars above, look at the time. Quick," she cried to the boy, getting up from the table.

They ran upstairs to her room at the back where he slept too, a room which did not smell of camphor like his aunt's room. He did not like to see Gladys take off her kitchen dress and stand, with bare shoulders and bare arms, in her petticoat, and bare-legged too, because then she became a person he did not know. She was shorter and more powerful. But when her Sunday blue dress was over her head and after she had said, "Oh these blooming things," when the hooks caught in her hair, he liked her again.

"How do I look?" she said, when she had her straw hat on, and, not waiting for an answer, she said, "Now, there's you! Brush your jersey! Quick."

Jim was waiting, she said. They went out of the room like the wind, and the text "Honour thy Father" swung sideways on the

wall. Down those dark stairs they went, two at a time, and were half out of the door when Uncle Tom made his great jump after them.

"Don't forget them stair-rods."

"Goodness," she said, grabbing them, "I'm going dizzy."

And then she was going down the street so fast that the boy had to trot.

"Oh!" She breathed more easily when they had got out of her street. "That's better. You ain't seen my new house." But she was talking to the street, not to him, smiling at it. She went along, smiling at the sky and the children playing hopscotch on the pavement, and the greengrocer's cart, as though she were eating the world like an orange and throwing away the skin as she went along. And her breasts and her plump chin jumped in time with her step.

"Which house is it?" the boy said.

"Not yet. Round the corner."

They turned the corner and there was another long street. "In this street?" he said.

"No. Round another corner."

He took her hand. She was walking so fast he was afraid of being lost. And then, down the next street, she calmed down.

Her face became stern. "Look at him, standing like a dummy! He hasn't seen us."

A man in a grey cap and a blue serge suit was standing on the pavement.

"Smoking," she said. "Bold as brass. There's men for you. He promised he'd give it up. Standing there daft and idle."

They were all workers in this family. Everything was work to them. Uncle Tom was always sawing and hammering. He had made the chests of drawers and the tables in his house. Aunt Annie scrubbed and cooked. Cousin Gladys was always sewing, and even when she came in from her factory she had, as they said, "something in her hands"—a brush, a broom, a cleaning cloth or scissors. Jim was a worker too. He worked at the post office in the middle of the town. One day Uncle Tom took the boy on top of a tram, and when they came near the post office he said: "Eh, look out this side and you'll see Gladys's Jim working. He's got a good job. Sometimes he's on nights. He's a night worker. Now, look out for him when the tram slows down."

The boy looked into the grey window of the post office as the tram passed by. Inside were dim rows of desks and people, and presently he saw Jim in his shirt sleeves. He was carrying a large wastepaper-basket.

"What's he doing?" said the boy.

"Sorting," said Uncle Tom. "Sorting the mail. His father put him into that job when he was fourteen."

The boy saw Jim lift the wastepaper-basket and then suddenly empty it over the head of another man who was sitting at a desk. He saw Jim laughing. He saw the man jump down and chase Jim across the office, laughing too.

"Larking about," said Uncle Tom indignantly. "That's government work."

The boy stopped laughing. He was scared of Jim after this. Jim was a tall man with a hungry face, but there was a small grin on his lips and after seeing him empty the wastepaper-basket the boy did not know what to make of him. It made him feel there was something reckless and secretive in the lives of Cousin Gladys and Jim.

Jim stood outside the gate of the house.

"You come to see the house?" he said to the boy. The boy murmured.

"Lost his tongue," said Jim.

"I've been in," he said to Gladys.

Gladys took his arm.

"Have you brought the things? I've got the stair-rods."

"I put them inside," he said.

"Oh, let me see," she said eagerly. The three went to the green front door of the house and Jim let them in. It was a small house of grey brick with a bay window.

"There," Jim said, pointing to the things. "I didn't take them upstairs. I waited for you."

On the floor was a wash-basin and a jug.

"I must wash them before we go," she said. "Take them to the kitchen."

Jim stood and winked at the boy.

"Orders," said Jim.

"I can't stand dirt," she said, getting up.

"Well," said Jim, "I'm waiting, aren't I?" He put this question to the boy and winked again.

"Oh," Gladys said, "don't be soft."

"Don't look," said Jim to the boy.

And then Gladys and Jim put their arms round each other and kissed. He saw her heels come off the ground and her knees bend. Gladys blushed and stepped back.

"Oh no, you don't, does she?" Jim said to the boy. And he pulled Gladys and gave her another kiss.

"Jim!" she cried. "You'll have me over."

The boy laughed and pulled at her waist from behind and they were all laughing until her shoe kicked the china basin on the floor. That stopped them.

"What'll Ma say when she sees my dress?" Gladys said.

"Oh," said Jim. "*He* won't tell." Winking again at the boy. "Here's a penny. Go into the garden and see if you can find some chocolate."

"No," said Gladys, kissing the boy and holding his hand. "He's my young man. He's looking after me."

They walked from room to room in the house. After Uncle Tom's house it was bare and smelled of size and new paint. The curtains were up, but there was very little furniture. In the sitting-room there was only a blue carpet and a small settee. Jim and Gladys stood at the door and took deep breaths when they looked at this room. There was a vase on the mantelpiece and Gladys moved the vase from the middle to the end.

"Now I've made it lopsided," she said. "It wants two."

"It wants a picture," said Jim, looking at the bare, lilac-coloured walls. "It looks bare."

"Don't complain," said Gladys, pouting.

"I'm not. I was only thinking," he said, putting his arm round her waist, but she stepped away. Jim gave her a look. The boy had seen her sulk before. He loved her and when she sulked he was frightened.

Jim went out into the hall and while he was out she stroked the boy's head and pressed him against her leg.

"You like it, don't you?" she said. "You don't think it's bare?"

"No," he said.

"I'll marry you. You don't grouse."

"Here—Glad—what's this here?" called Jim sharply from the hall. "When you've done spooning . . ."

Her sulk went at once. She went out. Jim and she were looking at a small dark spot on the ceiling.

"A leak!" she cried.

"From the bathroom," he said.

"Who left the water on last time?" she said.

"Your mother—washing things," Jim said.

"She never," Gladys said.

They both rushed upstairs. The carpet was not yet down on the stairs and their steps and voices echoed. It was a house of echoes. The boy did not follow. He went to see the painters' pails in the kitchen and to stir the oily remains of paint in them with a stick. He looked into the clean sink. He could not understand why Gladys and Jim were going to live in this house. He wanted to live there with them. He could not understand the laugh of his aunt and uncle, that peculiar laughter, so pleased and yet so jealous, so free and yet so uneasy, when they talked about Gladys living in this house. It was a laughter marked by side glances. The boy couldn't understand why it was important for him to be there, and he felt lost. He went at last upstairs and on the landing he heard them in the bathroom. They were talking. They had forgotten him. In the evasive way of grown-up people they had gone upstairs to look at the cause of the water coming through the ceiling and, now they were there, they were not talking about that at all. They were talking about people, about some person. The boy stood still and listened.

"They don't want him. *He's* away all the time travelling and she's having another, that'll be the fifth. Terrible, isn't it? Five, imagine it," Gladys was saying.

"Can't someone put her wise?" Jim said.

"I'd throw myself in the river."

The boy saw Gladys falling into the river. He thought, I wonder why Gladys wants to get her clothes wet and what will Aunt Annie say?

"I dunno. Kids are nice. I'd like one like that," Jim said.

"Nobody's kid. That's what he is," Gladys said. When he heard the word kid, the boy seemed to himself to swell and to lean and to topple with importance towards the bathroom door, but some fear of a woman's hand catching him by the leg or the arm made him seem to go thin again and lean away, till he crept quickly to the landing. There were two doors. Quietly he

opened one door and went into a small room. There was nothing in it at all, no curtains to the windows, no linoleum on the floor, no firegrate either, but only a mousehole. He looked down the mousehole and watched it for a long time but nothing came out of it. There was a smell of mouse which reminded him of his home and he looked out of the window down into three back gardens but no child was there. He wondered where nobody's kid was, but no child came. So he went to another room, for this was the house he wanted to live in with one room after another, if people would come and live in it and silence the echoes. Quietly he edged out of the room and guiltily looked into the next one. It was in the front of the house and looked on to the street. Each thing in the room seemed to look at him. There was a small carpet on the floor. There was a wardrobe, a dressing-table and a large bedstead with a mattress on it, but no sheets or blankets. It was like his aunt's and uncle's room, but this one was cold and smelled of the furniture shop. It had the mystery and watchful quietness of an empty bedroom.

"Where are you?" called Gladys. "Where's the boy gone?"

"He's round about," said Jim easily. They were walking towards the room. The boy could not escape. He stood still.

"Ah, there he is," Gladys cried. And they were both in the room with him.

"Who sleeps in this bed?" said the boy. Gladys went red. Jim winked.

"Gladys, who sleeps here?" Jim said.

"I don't know," said Gladys.

"Getcha, she does. She knows," Jim said. "Ask her."

"You do," the boy said, pointing at Gladys. "She does."

"I don't," said Gladys sternly.

"Jim does," she said sharply.

"He doesn't," the boy said. He had seen the lies rolling in their glances at each other.

"I do," said Jim.

"You don't," said the boy. "You're a night worker."

"That's a good one," said Jim, who never laughed but only smiled at the corner of his lips, and now suddenly shouted with laughter. "That's it. That's where I do my work. A night worker, that's where I do my work. Eh, Glad?"

"Jim, shut up," said Gladys primly. "Don't tease."

"I'm not teasing," laughed Jim. "I'm a hell of a night worker." And he made a grab at Gladys, who moved away.

"Jim," she said, "the neighbours. They can hear everything. These walls are like paper."

"You and the neighbours," laughed Jim and he caught up the boy high in the air and sat on the side of the bed. "One, two, three," he said, and at three he brought the boy down on the bed.

"Come here, Glad," he said, "you have a go. He's ticklish."

The boy called out and kicked.

"Don't," said Gladys, coming to rescue him.

"Ticklish yourself," said Jim, catching her arm and pulling her on the bed. The boy was free.

"Kiss her. Kiss her," cried the excited boy.

"Don't," said Gladys.

"I'll neighbour you," said Jim.

The boy watched them struggling and then he saw Jim was not kissing her but whispering in her ear.

"You are too real, Jim," she said tenderly. And then they were all lying quiet, Jim in the middle of them, with one arm round Gladys's neck and one arm round the boy and the boy wishing he could get away.

"Family already," Jim said. "You must have been on night work, Glad."

"Oh, give it a rest," said Glad. "Remember everything is taken back home. Little pigs have big ears."

"Very nice work too," said Jim.

"Don't be so awful," she pleaded.

"What's awful about it?"

A sigh came from Gladys.

"Very nice, I was saying," said Jim. "Sunday morning. Who's getting up to light the fire?"

"You."

"Me?—No, you."

"Married life," said Jim. "Hear that?"

"Who does sleep here, truthfully?" said the boy.

"Nobody does," said Gladys. "But Jim and me are going to when we are married. That satisfy you?"

The boy knew it was true. It was true because it was far beyond his understanding. Jim and Gladys watched him silently, but

Jim's arm tightened on her. They nodded to each other watching the boy.

"And we'll have you for our little boy," said Gladys.

He knew this was not true. He did not want to be their little boy. They cuddled and kissed and danced about too much; and then people smiled and laughed at them.

"Leave him alone," said Jim. And they all lay there silently, but he was aching to move from Jim's arm and to go. He was thinking of nobody's child and wishing he could find him, see him, watch him, talk to him.

"First question when I get back," Gladys said. "'Did you put the stair-rods down?' They think it's *their* house."

Yes, the boy wanted to get away from this house that wasn't a house yet, from this bed that was not a bed, and to see Aunt Annie and Uncle Tom who sat still for hours after they had worked. He was going to ask her who nobody's child was and how big he was, where he lived, to see him, to watch for a long time what he did, to throw something to him to see if he moved, to see if he talked and how his mouth looked when he talked.

"When are we going home?" he said.

The Collection

IT happens (when it does happen) on Sunday mornings. On weekdays, when he has to go to his factory, he is the first up, but on Sunday mornings he lies in. He awakens and first of all he looks at his wife, who is curled up like a white grub, with her hair all over her eyes. Typical. What a muddle she makes of sleeping; not like other women he knows. Of course, he doesn't mean that he knows what other women are like in bed, never has; but that is one black mark against her: he has been faithful to her: she might at least keep her hair tidy. And then there was last night—surely at their age, forty-five or whatever it is, without being vulgar about it—well (he thinks), I married a woman who doesn't understand the word "progress". He turns his face away, looks at the starchy white ceiling and lies there disturbed by the strange silence of the house. That's it: just because it's Sunday and he's not getting up, *they* aren't getting up. Why shouldn't *they* get up for a change?

"Edward, Philip, Rose," he shouts to the children. "Get up." And then to his wife, whose wakening eyes glitter like a pair of ants under her hair: "Come on, girl."

"Sunday," he says poetically. "Look at the sun. It is streaming in. Look at the sky. Listen to the birds. They're not wasting the day."

But nobody moves.

After this the usual thing happens. It is surprising how no one understands him in the house; he has to lose his temper and start shouting at the lazy hounds, the curs, to get the family to their feet.

"Oh, you," says his wife, to whom he has given a push. "You never give anyone any peace." And she gets out of bed stark naked. She is thin and round-shouldered and her neck is red.

"Here, here, I say," he says jovially, but he hates that about her more than anything. He closes his eyes at the sight.

"Pah," he says to himself. "There's no getting away from it. I married beneath me."

Downstairs in the kitchen the children are mooching, laying the table, kicking the furniture—he can hear that—cleaning his

boots, scared that they are getting blacking on the laces or skimping the heels.

He is lying in bed, listening to them, when suddenly he remembers:

"Good God, this Sunday I'm taking the collection."

He is out of bed at once, standing in his collapsing pyjamas. Why didn't someone remind him?

The children go to the bottom of the stairs and listen.

"He's in the bath," they say.

Twenty minutes go by, half an hour, an hour. The mystery of his toilet reigns over it. One after another the children tiptoe and listen.

Enormous volumes of water, as if the Congo were pouring into the house, are heard in the bathroom, sounds like the breathing and thumping of boxers, silences so long that he may have drowned. Then, through the keyhole, they see him shave; the dark rhino cheek frilled by soap, straining, Christianwise, to turn from the mirror, while the sacrificial blade comes down. When he is back in his room, they see him put on his blue suit and blue shirt and then take them off again. A hot smell of scent fills his room as he rubs three different lotions into his black hair while he considers the problem. He is taking the collection. Would the brown or the grey be more suitable? Or would it not be best to wear his tail coat and his striped trousers? He puts on a wing collar which bites at his throat and slices into his jowl. He puts on a silvery tie. Then he goes and disdains himself in the mirror.

The spy creeps down and a stair-rod comes out on the last tread.

"Confound you, you clumsy hound, what are you doing?" he roars from the mirror.

"He's nearly ready, Mum," the spy whispers.

Treading like a cat, floating silkily down, watching the amazing stripes of his trousers, with the gravity of a mourner, a little distracted, like a bridegroom by the flash of his spats which might make him misjudge the steps if he were not careful, he arrives downstairs and pauses in the doorway and puts on the impersonal yet benevolent scowl he intends to wear as he stands at the end of the pews waiting for the plate to come down the row. A plate in fact arrives; it is a plate of porridge rushed towards him by his wife.

"Oh," she cries stopping dead, tipping the plate. "You give me a fright."

"Give!" he says. "Gave. I'm taking the collection. Am I all right?"

Doesn't she know that it is an important thing to take the collection at the chapel, that people have their eye on you, that it has got to be done properly, and that people say, There's £20-a-week taking the collection? And in a sense, God is looking too. God is saying: That's it. Don't spare the expense. I want the best.

"Give me a brush," he says. "And the back. I look after *my* clothes. Where are those boys? Aren't they coming to church?"

"I don't know where they are," she says.

"Give the brush to me," he says.

"They were here," she says. "They're outside, I expect."

"Outside!" he shouts, hitting himself with the brush, lashing himself up. "I don't understand you, outside! The only day their father is home, they're outside. . . ."

He bangs the brush down. He is beginning to sweat.

"You'll be late," she says to him.

"Edward, Philip," he roars at the door, wiping his hat. There is no answer. "Come here when I call you." He puts his hat on. No answer.

"Come and watch your father go. He's going. Come and watch." She calls in her lighter voice. He stands there waiting, looking as though he will explode.

"If I had behaved like this to my father," he raps out, "I'd have been thrashed within an inch of my life."

But he has marched off, slamming the gate, as they creep up from the back of the house.

The garrulous church bells are stirring up the morning heat. No obedience, he thinks (once he is out of the house), no discipline, no love. No religion. That's her doing. No God. No progress. You might as well cast your pearls before swine. Idle hounds lounging about in the shed. Slack, don't wash. I slave all the week for their education, and what do I get? They bleed you, that's what children do, bleed you white. The Government's the same, bleeds you with taxation. Who goes to church nowadays? No one. Who believes in God—look at the state of the world for the answer. Why did we have a war? Perhaps if it could be

reckoned up, if you could get some really good accountant at it, it would turn out that I am the only one who really believes in the Truth. Many think they do; but do they?

Gradually, like the unfolding of a white rose in the sun, an intoxicating sensation of conspicuousness opens in his mind. He feels that he is flashing with sadness. And then as he gets near to the granite chapel he is happy. He sees the shabby people go in. They turn to look at him and whisper. Hard, severe, is he? Maybe.

He himself goes into the chapel and looks at the small congregation. The believers are few. They are indeed the elect, but the elect look dispirited. In the half-empty chapel he gazes at the red brick walls and he is calmed. He rises to sing, he kneels to pray, he sits.

He is awakened by the organ. Before he is ready for it, the time to take the collection has come. On the other side of the aisle he sees Mr Doncaster—wearing an ordinary brown suit—begin his collection as the organ mews and growls like an animal up in the loft. He stands up very upright—unlike Mr Doncaster, who is round-shouldered; he puts on the impersonal, official expression—not like Mr Doncaster's, who leans over the congregation thanking them disgustingly like a grocer; he affects not to hear the chink of coins in the plate and raises his eyes to the rafters if there is the rustle of a note. He takes the plate and hands it to the next row with a forbidding patience. He would like to take Mr Doncaster's side as well, because the pleasure of being given money for nothing has a touch of folly which only a man who has risen in the world can know. And then, as the organ rolls, he and Mr Doncaster walk together, dead level, slowly—he can feel the eyes of the congregation on him, almost heavily on him, tipping the chapel down on his side like a scale pan—he and Mr Doncaster, like bridegroom and bride, walk up the central aisle; and, after placing their offerings, return with the same gravity. And all the time he is thinking, Doncaster must feel a fool not being in black.

A sensation of being swept upwards by his excellent shoes, upwards toward some expensive radiance, cool, fleshless and flawless, overcomes him as if he were drunk. His eyes shine and twinkle, his cheeks are pink and happy. The sermon begins. The minister is barking away in the oak pulpit. Soon he hears nothing, but he looks round the chapel. A house with natural oak every-

where is what he would like, with tall, church-like windows on the stairs, an organ in the wide entrance hall, an open fire as wide as the chapel at the communion rail; gradually the chapel turns into a feudal castle, armour everywhere, himself in a kilt. His wife and children drift about in it, delightful creatures. Yes, he thinks, they are the children of God, we have put off the old Adam. His dreamy eyes come down from the chapel walls and he sees the yellow bald head of old Doncaster. Yes, he says, poor old Doncaster who doesn't brush his coat—yes, God made him, too.

I'm hungry, he says. What an appetite! Going to chapel does you good, sets you up. I wonder what there is for lunch?

Reluctantly he leaves the chapel, the scene of his vision. He has been in heaven. He marvels at the contradictions of his nature, he walks back home. At first he notices how well all the houses are painted and then the pleasant accent of people. The neighbourhood is going up. Then, he notices, the property deteriorates. Fences are not so good, a gate-hinge has gone. It's the war. His temperature lowers a little. He arrives at his own house. It is at the corner of the street and he notices, for the first time, that a paling has gone. The hedge has not been cut. A bush at the corner rocks like a broom. The boys are trampling down the garden again. He goes to his high gate. It sticks. He has to shake and rattle and then call. "Edward! Philip!" There is no answer. Yet distinctly he had heard them. He is obliged to dirty his gloves and his hands, forcing the confounded gate open. And what a sight: that paper left on the path.

"Edward," he says. "Come here. What's this?"

"Paper, Father."

"What paper?"

"Just paper, Father."

"Who put it there?"

"I don't know."

Edward's alarmed eyes are fixed on his father's. He cannot take them away. In that coat, that collar, so naked at the neck, behind the bars of those striped trousers, he looks militant and tigerish.

"When did you clean your boots?" says the father, sudden in his attack.

The boy flinches.

"This morning."

"Don't lie," says the father. "Why can't you tell the truth? A man who doesn't tell the truth, fearlessly, in all circumstances, come what may, forfeits my trust. If a man lies to me in my business I sack him—on the spot. Pick that paper up."

He goes into the house.

"Philip," he calls. "Why isn't the table laid? Do you expect your father and mother to slave for you? Don't you know there are no servants? I suppose you think you are a lord or something. Let me tell you, in this world, we are all servants."

He marches into the kitchen. As he advances, he notices a shadow goes with him. Smiles vanish; scowls, evasions, furtive, deceitful, lying looks pass over the faces of his family. It is all so unlike the communion of saints.

"Don't crash the forks on that table," he calls back down the passage. "You would have to pay £80 for it to-day."

His wife is still in her old apron, the sweat from the heat of the fire is on her face as she kneels. He goes out of the kitchen as quickly as he can.

The family are sitting down to lunch.

"Stop kicking the table, Philip," he says as he carves. He glares. They all lower their eyes.

"Take that plate, pass it down, it's not for yourself. Think of others," he says. "Others before self always, the golden rule." And then he looks at Edward.

"Edward," he says. "What have you done to your hair?"

"Nothing."

"I told you before about lying. Why have you got your best suit on, getting yourself up like that, what's the idea?"

"Edward wants to go out," says Philip.

"What's that?" he says. "What's that, Edward? Did I understand that you want to go out?"

"On Sunday?" he says. "Your father's only day at home, and you want to go out. I never heard of such a thing."

The father goes pale as if he had cut himself with the carving knife.

"You stay in and shut up, Edward," says his mother. "You cause enough trouble as it is. Get on with your food."

"Go out with who?" says the father. "Who is it you value more than your father and mother? It's not some girl, is it? I won't have you go with girls. I don't want trouble with girls at your

age. Oh, I'm glad to hear it. You're not telling me lies, are you? You tell lies. I know you deceive me, lie and deceive, but you can't deceive God. He sees, He knows when you're telling lies. I don't like people who tell lies. I don't like boys who aren't friends with their fathers. It's not some girl? Look me in the face."

"No," says Edward in a weak voice. Tears are very near his eyes. A light glints in the father's eyes. He has seen the son's weakness.

"N'no, n'no. I don't understand that language. Be straightforward. If you mean yes, say yes. If you mean no, say no. N'n'no. I never heard of it. Sit up straight and speak to your father. Go on now—what is it?"

Tears pour into Edward's eyes, tears of rage and shame, and rush down his cheeks.

"I just want to go out. I want to get away from this," he shouts, but he is crying so hard that no one understands. He shouts and cries, starts up and goes out of the room, knocking his chair over.

"Look what you've done!" shouts the wife, banging down her knife and fork. "I can't stand this. Every Sunday the same. I'm going too."

And crying also, she leaves the table.

The father gapes at the astonishing scene. He looks down gently at the other children. What on earth have I done? he silently asks them. He suspects they are going to move too.

"Stop where you are," he says.

He stands there. The food is going cold on his plate. It is all so stupefying, so sudden. He feels that lions are inside him rending him apart. He feels that he is like Samson, the hairy Samson of the Bible, who has pulled down the temple crashing on top of him. The day he has taken the collection, too.

Thank God, he thinks, I shall be at the office to-morrow. People understand me there.

Of course, he gets them back. It takes a bit of doing, the lunch is cold, but she heats it up again. Everyone has a good cry, and while they're at it, he goes up and changes into another suit. Everyone is shy and disappointed and sorry for him after that; and, not to annoy him, no one goes out. They stay in the room with him, all of them, and in their midst he falls asleep. He sleeps and sleeps and his snores rise and dive, cavort and turn over like fighters in the room. And waking at last at the end of the afternoon, he looks at them with surprise. It's all gone, he has forgiven them.

The Satisfactory

“WHEN one says that what one is still inclined to call civilization is passing through a crisis,” Mr Plymbell used to say during the last war and after it when food was hard to get, and standing in his very expensive antique shop, raising a white and more than Roman nose and watching the words go off one by one on the air and circle the foreign customer, “one is tempted to ask oneself whether or not a few possibly idle phrases that one let fall to one’s old friend Lady Hackthorpe at a moment of national distress in 1940 are not, in fact, still pertinent. One recalls observing, rightly or wrongly at that time, that one was probably witnessing not the surrender of an heroic Ally but the defeat of sauces. Béarnaise, hollandaise, madère—one saw them overrun. One can conceive of the future historians enquiring whether the wars of the last ten years, and indeed what one calls ‘the peace’, have not been essentially an attack on gastronomy, on the stomach and palate of the human race. One could offer the modest example of one’s daily luncheon. . . .”

Mr Plymbell can talk like *The Times* for ever. Not all the campaigns of our time have been fought on the battlefield. His lunch in those bad days was a study.

At two minutes before half-past twelve every day, Plymbell was first in the queue in the foyer outside the locked glass doors of Polli’s Restaurant, a few yards from his shop. On one side of the glass Plymbell floated—handsome, Roman, silver-haired, as white-skinned and consequent as a turbot of fifty; on the other side of the glass, in the next aquarium, stood Polli with the key in his hand waiting for the clock to strike the half hour—a man liverish and suspended in misanthropy like a tench in the weeds of a canal. Plymbell stared clean through Polli to the sixty empty tables beyond; Polli stared clean through the middle of Plymbell into the miasma of the restaurant-keeper’s life. Two fish gazed with the indifference of creatures who have accepted the fact that neither of them is edible. What they wanted, what the whole of England was crying for, was not fish but red meat, and to get meat at Polli’s one had to be there at half-past twelve, on the dot.

First customer in was Plymbell. He had his table, in the middle of this chipped Edwardian place, with his back to one of those white pillars that gave it the appearance of a shop-soiled wedding-cake mounted on a red carpet, and he faced the serving-hatch. Putting up a monocle to his more annoyed eye, he watched the chef standing over his pans, and while he watched he tapped the table with lightly frantic fingers. Polli's waiters were old men, and the one who served Plymbell had the dejected smirk of a convict.

Plymbell used hardly to glance at the farcical menu and never looked at the waiter when he coldly gave his order. "Two soups," said Plymbell. "Two roast beefs. . . . Cheese and biscuits," he added. "Bring me mine now and you can bring the second order in a quarter of an hour, when my secretary arrives."

It was a daily scene. Plymbell's waiter came forward with his dishes like one hurrying a funeral in a hot country, feebly averting his nose from the mess he was carrying on his dish. He scraped his serving-spoons and, at the end, eyed his customer with criminal scorn. Plymbell's jaws moved over this stuff with a slow social agony. In fifteen minutes he had eaten his last biscuit and was wetting his finger to pick up the small heap of crumbs he had worked to one side of his plate. Plymbell looked at his watch.

Exactly at this moment Plymbell's assistant used to come in. Shabby, thin, with wrinkled cotton stockings and dressed in black, a woman of forty-five, Miss Tell scraped on poor shoes to the table. She carried newspapers in a bundle under an arm and a basket in her hand. He would look carefully away from her as she alighted like some dingy fly at the other side of the table. It was astonishing to see a man so well dressed lunching with a woman so bowed and faded. But presently she used to do a conjuring trick. Opening her bundle, Miss Tell put a newspaper down on the roll of bread on her side plate and then picked it up again. The roll of bread had gone. She had slipped it into her lap. A minute passed while she wriggled to and fro like a laying hen, and then she would drop the roll into the basket by the leg of her chair.

Plymbell would be looking away from her while she did this and, his lips hardly moving, he would speak one word.

"What?" was the word.

She replied also with one word—the word naturally varied—

cringing towards him, looking with fear, trying to get him to look at her.

"Sausages," she might whisper.

"How many?" Plymbell would ask. He still did not look at her.

"Half pound," she said. On some fortunate days: "A pound."

Plymbell studied the domed skylight in the ceiling of the restaurant. The glass was still out in those days; the boards put there during the war when a bomb blew out the glass had not been replaced. Meanwhile the waiter brought a plate of soup to Miss Tell. She would stare at the soup without interest. When the waiter went, she lifted the plate across the table and put it in Plymbell's place, and then lowered her head in case other customers had seen. Plymbell had not seen, because he had been gazing at the ceiling, but, as if absent-mindedly, he picked up a spoon and began to drink Miss Tell's soup, and when he had finished, put her plate back on her side of the table, and the waiter took it away.

Plymbell had been lunching at Polli's for years. He used to lunch there before the war with Lady Hackthorpe. She was a handsome woman—well-cut clothes, well-cut diamonds, brilliantly cut eyes, and sharply cut losses. Plymbell bought and sold for her, decorated her house.

Miss Tell used to go home to her parents in the evenings and say, "I don't understand it. I make out her bill every month, and he says, 'Miss Tell, give me Lady Hackthorpe's bill,' and tears it up."

Miss Tell lived by what she did not understand. It was an appetite.

After 1940, no more Lady Hackthorpe. A bomb cut down half of her house and left a Hepplewhite bed full of broken glass and ceiling plaster on the first floor, and a servant's washstand on the floor above. Lady Hackthorpe went to Ireland.

Plymbell got the bed and a lot of other things out of the house into his shop. Here again, there was something Miss Tell did not understand. She was supposed to "keep the books straight". Were Lady Hackthorpe's things being "stored" or were they being "returned to stock"?

"I mean," Miss Tell said, "if anyone was killed when a thing is left open, it's unsatisfactory."

Plymbell listened and did not answer. He was thinking of other

things. The war on the stomach and the palate had begun. Not only had Lady Hackthorpe gone. Plymbell's business was a function of Lady Hackthorpe's luncheons and dinners, and other people's too. He was left with his mouth open in astonishment and hunger.

"Trade has stopped now," Miss Tell said one night when she ducked into the air-raid shelter with her parents. "Poor Mr Plymbell never goes out."

"Why doesn't he close the business, Kitty?" Miss Tell's mother said.

"And leave all that valuable stock?" said Mr Tell. "Where's your brain?"

"I never could fathom business," said Mrs Tell.

"It's the time to pick up things," said Mr Tell.

"That's a way to talk when we may all be dead in a minute," said Mrs Tell.

Mr Tell said something about prices being bound to go up, but a huge explosion occurred and he stopped.

"And this Lady Hackthorpe—is she *friendly* with this Plymbell?" said old Mrs Tell when the explosion settled in as part of the furniture of their lives.

"*Mr* Plymbell," Miss Tell corrected her mother. Miss Tell had a poor, fog-coloured London skin and blushed in a patch across her forehead. "I don't *query* his private life."

"He's a man," sighed Mrs Tell. "To hear you talk he might be the Fairy Prince or Lord Muck himself. Listen to those guns. You've been there fifteen years."

"It takes two to be friendly," said Miss Tell, who sometimes spoke like a poem. "When one goes away it may be left open one way or another, I mean, and that—" Miss Tell searched for a new word, but returned to the old one, the only one that ever, for her, met the human case—"and that," she said, "is unsatisfactory."

"You're neurotic," her mother said. "You never have any news."

And then Miss Tell had a terrible thought. "Mum!" she cried, dropping the poetic accent she brought back from the West End every night, "where's Tiger? We've left him in the house."

Her mother became swollen with shame.

"You left him," accused Miss Tell. "You left him in the kitchen." She got up. "No one's got any heart. I'm going to get him."

"You stay here, my girl," said Mr Tell.

"Come back, Kitty," said Mrs Tell.

But Miss Tell (followed across the garden, as it seemed to her, by an aeroplane) went to the house. In her panic Mrs Tell had left not only the cat, she had left her handbag and her ration books on the kitchen table. Miss Tell picked up the bag, and then kneeled under the table looking for Tiger. "Tiger, dear! Tiger!" she called. He was not there. It was at this instant that the aeroplane outside seemed to have followed her into the house. When Miss Tell was dug out alive and unhurt, black with dust, six hours later, Mr and Mrs Tell were dead in the garden.

When Plymbell talks of that time now, he says there were moments when one was inclined to ask oneself whether the computed odds of something like eight hundred and ninety-seven thousand to one in favour of one's nightly survival were not, perhaps, an evasion of a private estimate one had arrived at without any special statistical apparatus—that it was fifty-fifty, and even providential. It was a point, he said, one recollected making to one's assistant at the time, when she came back.

Miss Tell came back to Plymbell's at lunch-time one day a fortnight after she had been dug out. She was singular: she had been saved by looking for her cat. Mr Plymbell was not at the shop, or in his rooms above it. In the vainglory of her escape, she went round to Polli's. Plymbell was more than half-way through his meal when he saw her come in. She was wearing no hat on her dusty black hair, and under her black coat, which so often had ends of cotton on it, she was wearing navy-blue trousers. Plymbell winced: it was the human aspect of war that was so lowering; he saw at once that Miss Tell had become a personality. Watching the wag of her narrow shoulders as she walked, he saw she had caught the general immodesty of the "bombed out".

Without being invited, she sat down at his table and put herself sideways, at her ease, crossing her legs to show her trousers. Her face had filled out into two little puffs of vanity on

either side of her mouth, as if she were eating or were containing a yawn. The two rings of age on her neck looked like a cheap necklace. Lipstick was for the first time on her lips. It looked like blood.

"One enquired in vain," said Plymbell with condescension. "I am glad to see you back."

"I thought I might as well pop round," said Miss Tell.

Mr Plymbell was alarmed; her note was breezy. "Aren't you coming back?"

"I haven't found Tiger," said Miss Tell.

"Tiger?"

Miss Tell told him her story.

Plymbell saw that he must try and put himself for a moment in his employee's situation and think of her grief. "One recalls the thought that passed through one's mind when one's own mother died," he said.

"They had had their life," said Miss Tell.

A connoisseur by trade, Plymbell was disappointed by the banality of Miss Tell's remark. What was grief? It was a hunger. Not merely personal, emotional and spiritual; it was physical. Plymbell had been forty-two when his mother died, and he, her only child, had always lived with her. Her skill with money, her jackdaw eye had made the business. The morning she died in hospital he had felt that a cave had been opened inside his body under the ribs, a cave getting larger and colder and emptier. He went out and ate one of the largest meals of his life.

While Miss Tell, a little fleshed already in her tragedy, was still talking, the waiter came to the table with Plymbell's allowance of cheese and biscuits.

Plymbell remembered his grief. "Bring me another portion for my secretary," he said.

"Oh no, not for me," said Miss Tell. She was too dazed by the importance of loss to eat. "I couldn't."

But Polli's waiter had a tired, deaf head. He came back with biscuits for Miss Tell.

Miss Tell looked about the restaurant until the waiter left and then coquettishly she passed her plate to Plymbell. "For you," she said. "I couldn't."

Plymbell thought Miss Tell ill-bred to suggest that he would eat what she did not want. He affected not to notice and gazed

over her head, but his white hand had already taken the plate, and in a moment, still looking disparagingly beyond her, in order not to catch her eye, Mr Plymbell bit into one of Miss Tell's biscuits. Miss Tell was smiling slyly.

After he had eaten her food, Mr Plymbell looked at Miss Tell with a warmer interest. She had come to work for him in his mother's time, more than fifteen years before. Her hair was still black, her skin was now grey and yellow with a lilac streak on the jaw, there were sharp stains like poor coffee under her eyes. These were brown with a circle of gold in the pupils, and they seemed to burn as if there were a fever in their shadows. Her black coat, her trousers, her cotton blouse were cheap, and even her body seemed to be thin with cheapness. Her speech was awkward, for part of her throat was trying to speak in a refined accent and the effect was half arrogant, half disheartened. Now, as he swallowed the last piece of biscuit, she seemed to him to change. Her eyes were brilliant. She had become quietly a human being.

What is a human being? The chef whom he could see through the hatch was one; Polli, who was looking at the menu by the cash desk, was another; his mother, who had made remarkable ravioli; people like Lady Hackthorpe, who had given such wonderful dinner-parties before the war; that circle which the war had scattered and where he had moved from one lunch to the next in a life that rippled to the sound of changing plates that tasted of sauces now never made. These people had been human beings. One knew a human being when the juices flowed over one's teeth. A human being was a creature who fed one. Plymbell moved his jaws. Miss Tell's sly smile went. He looked as though he was going to eat *her*.

"You had better take the top room at the shop," he said. "Take the top room if you have nowhere to live."

"But I haven't found Tiger," Miss Tell said. "He must be starving."

"You won't be alone," said Plymbell. "I sleep at the shop."

Miss Tell considered him. Plymbell could see she was weighing him against Tiger in her mind. He had offered her the room because she had fed him.

"You have had your lunch, I presume," said Plymbell as they walked back to the shop.

"No—I mean yes. Yes, no," said Miss Tell secretively, and again there was the blush like a birthmark on her forehead.

"Where do you go?" said Plymbell, making a shameful enquiry.

"Oh," said Miss Tell defensively, as if it were a question of chastity. "Anywhere. I manage. I vary." And when she said she varied, Miss Tell looked with a virginal importance first one way and then the other.

"That place starves one," said Plymbell indignantly. "One comes out of there some days and one is weak with hunger."

Miss Tell's flush went. She was taken by one of those rages that shake the voices and the bones of unmarried women, as if they were going to shake the nation by the scruff of its neck. "It's wrong, Mr Plymbell. The Government ought to give men more rations. A man needs food. Myself, it never worries me. I never eat. Poor Mother used to say, 'Eat, girl, eat.' " A tear came to Miss Tell's right eye, enlarged it and made it liquid, burning, beautiful. "It was funny, I didn't seem to fancy anything. I just picked things over and left them."

"I never heard of anyone who found the rations too much," said Mr Plymbell with horror.

"I hardly touch mine since I was bombed out," said Miss Tell, and she straightened her thin, once humble body, raised her small bosom, which was ribbed like a wicker basket, gave her hair a touch or two, and looked with delicate resolution at Plymbell. "I sometimes think of giving my ration books away," she said in an offhand way.

Plymbell gaped at the human being in front of him. "Give them away!" he exclaimed. "*Them?* Have you got more than one?"

"I've got Father's and Mother's too."

"But one had gathered that the law required one to surrender the official documents of the deceased," said Plymbell, narrowing his eyes suggestively. His heart had livened, his mouth was watering.

Miss Tell moved her erring shoulders, her eyes became larger, her lips drooped. "It's wicked of me," she said.

Plymbell took her thin elbow in his hand and contained his anxiety. "I should be very careful about those ration books. I shouldn't mention it. There was a case in the paper the other day."

They had reached the door of the shop. "How is Lady Hackthorpe?" Miss Tell asked. "Is she still away?"

Miss Tell had gone too far; she was being familiar. Plymbell put up his monocle and did not reply.

A time of torture began for Plymbell when Miss Tell moved in. He invited her to the cellar on the bad nights, but Miss Tell had become lightheaded with fatalism and would not move from her bed on the top floor. In decency Plymbell had to remain in his bed and take shelter no more. Above him slept the rarest of human beings, a creature who had three ration books, a woman who was technically three people. He feared for her at every explosion. His mouth watered when he saw her: the woman with three books who did not eat and who thought only of how hungry Tiger must be. If he could have turned himself into a cat!

At one point Plymbell decided that Miss Tell was like Lady Hackthorpe with her furniture; Miss Tell wanted money. He went to the dark corner behind a screen between his own office and the shop, where sometimes she sewed. When he stood by the screen he was nearly on top of her. "If," he said in a high, breaking voice that was strange even to himself, "if you are ever thinking of *selling* your books . . ."

He had made a mistake. Miss Tell was mending and the needle was pointing at him as she stood up. "I couldn't do that," she said. "It is forbidden by the law." And she looked at him strictly.

Plymbell gaped before her hypocrisy. Miss Tell's eyes became larger, deeper and liquid in the dusk of the corner where she worked. Her chin moved up in a number of amused, resentful movements; her lips moved. Good God, thought Plymbell, is she eating? Her thin arms were slack, her body was inert. She continued to move her dry lips. She leaned her head sideways and raised one eye. Plymbell could not believe what he saw. Miss Tell was plainly telling him: Yes, I *have* got something in my mouth. It is the desire to be kissed.

Or was he wrong? Plymbell was not a kissing man. His white, demanding face was indeed white with passion, and his lips were shaped for sensuality, but the passion of the gourmet, the libidinousness of the palate gave him his pallor. He had felt desire, in his way, for Lady Hackthorpe, but it had been con-

summated in *bisques*, in *crêpes*, in *flambées*, in *langouste* done in many manners, in *ailloli*, in *bouillabaisse* and vintage wines. That passion had been starved, and he was perturbed by Miss Tell's signal. One asks oneself (he reflected, going to his office and considering reproachfully his mother's photograph, which stood on his desk)—one asks oneself whether or not a familiar adage about Nature's abhorrence of a vacuum had not a certain relevance, and indeed whether one would not be justified in coining a vulgar phrase to the effect that when one shuts the front door on Nature, she comes in at the back. Miss Tell was certainly the back; one might call her the scullery of the emotions.

Plymbell lowered his pale eyelids in a flutter of infidelity, unable honestly to face his mother's stare. Her elderly aquiline nose, her close-curved silver hair tipped with a touch of fashionable idiocy off the forehead, her too-jewelled, hawking, grabbing, slapdash face derided him for the languor of the male symptom, and at the same time, with the ratty double-facedness of her sex, spoke sharply about flirtations with employees. Plymbell's eyes lied to her image. All the same, he tried to calm himself by taking a piece of violet notepaper and dashing off a letter to Lady Hackthorpe. Avocado pear, he wrote, whitebait (did she think?) *bœuf bourguignon*, or what about *dindonneau* in those Italian pastes? It was a letter of lust. He addressed the envelope, and, telling Miss Tell to post it, Plymbell pulled down the points of his slack waistcoat and felt saved.

So saved that when Miss Tell came back and stood close to his desk, narrow and flat in her horrible trousers, and with her head turned to the window, showing him her profile, Plymbell felt she was satirically flirting with his hunger. Indignantly he got up and, before he knew what he was doing, he put his hand under her shoulder-blade and kissed her on the lips.

A small frown came between Miss Tell's eyebrows. Her lips were tight and set. She did not move. "Was that a bill you sent to Lady Hackthorpe?" she asked.

"No," said Plymbell. "A personal letter."

Miss Tell left his office.

Mr Plymbell wiped his mouth on his handkerchief. He was shocked by himself; even more by the set lips, the closed teeth, the hard chin of Miss Tell; most of all by her impertinence. He had committed a folly for nothing and he had been insulted.

The following morning Plymbell went out on his weekly search for food, but he was too presumptuous for the game. In the coarse world of provisions and the black market the monocle was too fine. Plymbell lacked the touch; in a long day all he managed to get was four fancy cakes. Miss Tell came out of her dark corner and looked impersonally at him. He was worn out.

"No offal," he said in an appalled, hoarse voice. "No offal in the whole of London."

"Ooh," said Miss Tell, quick as a sparrow. "I got some. Look." And she showed him her disgusting, bloodstained triumph on its piece of newspaper.

Never had Miss Tell seemed so common, so flagrant, so lacking in sensibility, but, also, never had she seemed so desirable. And then, as before, she became limp and neutral and she raised her chin. There were the unmistakable crumb-licking movements of her lips. Plymbell saw her look sideways at him as she turned. Was she inviting him to wipe out the error of the previous day? With one eye on the meat, Plymbell made a step towards her, and in a moment Miss Tell was on him, kissing him, open-mouthed and with frenzy, her finger-nails in his arms, and pressing herself to him to the bone.

"Sweetbreads," she said. "For you. I never eat them. Let me cook them for you."

An hour later she was knocking at the door of his room, and carrying a loaded tray. It was laid, he was glad to notice, for one person only. Plymbell said, "One had forgotten what sweetbreads were."

"It was nothing. I have enjoyed your confidence for fifteen years," said Miss Tell in her poetic style. And the enlarged eyes looked at him with an intimate hunger.

That night, as usual, Plymbell changed into a brilliant dressing-gown, and, standing before the mirror, he did his hair, massaging with the fingers, brushing first with the hard ivory brush and then with the soft one. As he looked into the glass, Miss Tell's enquiring face kept floating into it, displacing his own.

"Enjoyed my confidence!" said Plymbell.

In her bedroom Miss Tell turned out the light, drew back the curtains, and looked into the London black and at the inane triangles of the searchlights. She stood there listening. "Tiger, Tiger," she murmured. "Where are you? Why did you go away

from me? I miss you in my bed. Are you hungry? I had a lovely dinner ready for you—sweetbreads. I had to give it to him because you didn't come."

In answer, the hungry siren went like the wail of some monstrous, disembodied Tiger, like all the dead cats of London restless beyond the grave.

Miss Tell drew the curtains and lay down on her bed. "Tiger," she said crossly, "if you don't come to-morrow, I shall give everything to him. He needs it. Not that he deserves it. Filling up the shop with that woman's furniture, storing it free of charge, writing her letters, ruining himself for her. I hate her. I always have. I don't understand him and her, how she gets away with it, owing money all round. She's got a hold . . ."

The guns broke out. They were declaring war upon Lady Hackthorpe.

Tiger did not come back, and rabbit was dished up for Plymbell. He kissed Miss Tell a third time. It gave him the agreeable sensation that he was doing something for the war. After the fourth kiss, Plymbell became worried. Miss Tell had mentioned stuffed veal. She had spoken of mushrooms. He had thoughtlessly exceeded in his embrace. He had felt for the first time in his life—voluptuousness; he had discovered how close to eating kissing is, and as he allowed his arm to rest on Miss Tell's lower-class waist he had had the inadvertent impression of picking up a cutlet in his fingers. Plymbell felt he had done enough for the vanity of Miss Tell. He was in the middle of this alarmed condition when Miss Tell came into his office and turned his alarm to consternation.

"I've come to give my notice," she said.

Plymbell was appalled. "What is wrong, Miss Tell?" he said.

"Nothing's wrong," said Miss Tell. "I feel I am not needed."

"Have I offended you?" said Plymbell suspiciously. "Is it money?"

Miss Tell looked sharply. She was insulted. "No," she said. "Money is of no interest to me. I've got nothing to do. Trade's stopped."

Plymbell made a speech about trade.

"I think I must have got"—Miss Tell searched for a word and lost her poetic touch—"browed off," she said, and blushed. "I'll get a job in a canteen. I like cooking."

Plymbell in a panic saw not one woman but three women leaving him. "But you are cooking for me," he said.

Miss Tell shrugged.

"Oh yes, you are. Miss Tell—be my housekeeper."

Good God, thought Plymbell afterwards, so that was all she wanted. I needn't have kissed her at all.

How slowly one learns about human nature, he thought. Here was a woman with one simple desire: to serve him—to slave for him, to stand in queues, to cook, to run his business, do everything. And who did not eat.

"I shall certainly not kiss her again," he said.

At this period of his life, with roofs leaving their buildings and servants leaving their places all round him, Plymbell often reflected guardedly upon his situation. There was, he had often hinted, an art in keeping servants. He appeared, he noted, to have this art. But would he keep it? What was it? Words of his mother's came back to him. Miss Tell left a better job and higher wages to come to me. This job is more flattering to her self-importance. Never consider them, never promise; they will despise you. The only way to keep servants is to treat them like hell. Look at Lady Hackthorpe's couple. They'd die for her. They probably will.

Two thousand years of civilization lay in those remarks.

"And never be familiar." Guiltily, he could imagine Lady Hackthorpe putting in her word. As the year passed, as his nourishment improved, the imaginary Lady Hackthorpe rather harped on the point.

There was no doubt about it, Plymbell admitted, he *had* been familiar. But only four times, he protested. And what is a kiss, in an office? At this he could almost hear Lady Hackthorpe laughing, in an insinuating way, that she hardly imagined there could be any question of his going any farther.

Plymbell, now full of food, blew up into a temper with the accusing voices. He pitched into Miss Tell. He worked out a plan of timely dissatisfaction. His first attack upon her was made

in the shop in the presence of one of the rare customers of those days.

"Why no extra liver this week, Miss Tell? My friend here has got some," he said.

Miss Tell started, then blushed on the forehead. It was, he saw, a blush of pleasure. Public humiliation seemed to delight Miss Tell. He made it harder. "Why no eggs?" he shouted down the stairs, and on another day, as if he had a whip in his hand, "Anyone can get olive oil." Miss Tell smiled and looked a little sideways at him.

Seeing he had not hurt her in public, Plymbell then made a false move. He called her to his room above the shop and decided to "blow her up" privately.

"I can't *live* on fish," he began. But whereas, delighted to be noticed, she listened to his public complaints in the shop, she did not listen in his room. By his second sentence, she had turned her back and wandered to the sofa. From there she went to his writing-table, trailing a finger on it. She was certainly not listening. In the middle of his speech and as his astounded, colourless eyes followed her, she stopped and pointed through the double doors where his bedroom was, and she pointed to the Hepplewhite bed.

"Is that Lady Hackthorpe's too?" she said.

"Yes," said Plymbell.

"Why do you have it up here?" she said rudely.

"Because I like it," said Plymbell, snubbing her.

"I think four-posters are unhealthy," said Miss Tell, and circled with meandering impertinence to the window and looked out onto the street. "That old man," she said, admitting the vulgar world into the room, "is always going by."

Miss Tell shrugged at the window and considered the bed again across the space of two rooms. Then, impersonally, she made a speech. "I never married," she said. "I have been friendly but not married. One great friend went away. There was no agreement, nothing said, he didn't write and I didn't write. In those cases I sympathize with the wife, but I wondered when he didn't communicate. I didn't know whether it was over or not over, and when you don't know, it isn't satisfactory. I don't say it was anything, but I would have liked to know whether it was or not. I never mention it to anyone."

"Oh," said Plymbell.

"It upset Dad," said Miss Tell, and of that she was proud.

"I don't follow," said Plymbell. He wanted to open the window and let Miss Tell's private life out.

"It's hard to describe something unsatisfactory," said Miss Tell. And then, "Dad was conventional."

Mr Plymbell shuddered.

"Are you interested?" asked Miss Tell.

"Please, please go on," said Plymbell.

"I have been 'the other woman' three times," said Miss Tell primly.

Plymbell put up his monocle, but as far as he could judge, all Miss Tell had done was make a public statement. He could think of no reply. His mind drifted. Suddenly he heard the voice of Miss Tell again, trembling, passionate, raging as it had been once before, at Polli's, attacking him.

"She uses you," Miss Tell was saying. "She puts all her rubbish into your shop, she fills up your flat. She won't let you sell it. She hasn't paid you. Storage is the dearest thing in London. You could make a profit, you could turn over your stock. Now is the time to buy, Dad said. . . ."

Plymbell picked up his paper.

"Lady Hackthorpe," explained Miss Tell, and he saw her face, small-mouthed and sick and shaking with jealousy.

"Lady Hackthorpe has gone to America," Plymbell said, in his snubbing voice.

Miss Tell's rage had spent itself. "If you were not so horrible to me, I would tell you an idea," she said.

"Horrible? My dear Miss Tell," said Mr Plymbell, leaning back as far as he could in his chair.

"It doesn't matter," said Miss Tell, and she walked away. "When is Lady Hackthorpe coming back?" she said.

"After the war, I suppose," said Plymbell.

"Oh," said Miss Tell, without belief.

"What is your idea?"

"Oh no. It was about lunch. At Polli's. It is nothing," said Miss Tell.

"Lunch," said Plymbell with a start, dropping his eyeglass. "What about lunch?" And his mouth stayed open.

Miss Tell turned about and approached him. "No, it's unsatis-

factory," said Miss Tell. She gave a small laugh and then made the crumb movements with her chin.

"Come here," commanded Plymbell. "What idea about lunch?"

Miss Tell did not move, and so he got up, in a panic now. A suspicion came to him that Polli's had been bombed, that someone—perhaps Miss Tell herself—was going to take his lunch away from him. Miss Tell did not move. Mr Plymbell did not move. Feeling weak, Mr Plymbell decided to sit down again. Miss Tell came and sat on the arm of his chair.

"Nothing," she said, looking into his eyes for a long time and then turning away. "You have been horrid to me for ten months and thirteen days. You know you have." Her back was to him.

Slices of pork he saw, mutton, beef. He went through a nightmare that he arrived at Polli's late, all the customers were inside, and the glass doors were locked. The head waiter was standing there refusing to open. Miss Tell's unnourished back made him think of this. He did no more than put his hand on her shoulder, as slight as a chicken bone, and as he did so, he seemed to hear a sharp warning snap from Lady Hackthorpe. "Gus," Lady Hackthorpe seemed to say, "what are you doing? Are you mad? Don't you know why Miss Tell had to leave her last place?" But Lady Hackthorpe's words were smothered. A mere touch—without intention on Plymbell's part—had impelled Miss Tell to slide backward into his lap.

"How have I been horrid to you?" said Plymbell, forgetting to put inverted commas round the word "horrid".

"You know," said Miss Tell.

"What was this idea of yours?" he said quietly, and he kissed her neck. "No, no," she said, and moved her head to the other side of his neck. There was suddenly a sound that checked them both. Her shoe fell off. And then an extraordinary thing happened to Plymbell. The sight of Miss Tell's foot without its shoe did it. At fifty, he felt the first indubitable symptom. A scream went off inside his head—Lady Hackthorpe nagging him about some man she had known who had gone to bed with his housekeeper. "Ruin," Lady Hackthorpe was saying.

"About lunch—it was a good idea," Miss Tell said tenderly into his collar.

But it was not until three in the morning that Miss Tell told Plymbell what the idea was.

And so, every weekday, there was the modest example of Mr Plymbell's daily luncheon. The waiter used to take the empty soup plate away from Miss Tell and presently came forward with the meat and vegetables. He scraped them off his serving-dish on to her plate. She would keep her head lowered for a while, and then, with a glance to see if other customers were looking, she would lift the plate over to Mr Plymbell's place. He, of course, did not notice. Then, absently, he settled down to eat her food. While he did this he muttered, "What did you get?" She nodded at her stuffed basket and answered. Mr Plymbell ate two lunches. While this went on, Miss Tell looked at him. She was in a strong position now. Hunger is the basis of life and, for her, a great change had taken place. The satisfactory had occurred.

But now, of course, French cookery has come back.

The Ladder

“**W**E had the builders in at the time,” my father says in his accurate way, if he ever mentions his second marriage, the one that so quickly went wrong. “And,” he says, clearing a small apology from his throat as though preparing to say something immodest, “we happened to be without stairs.”

It is true. I remember that summer. I was fifteen years old. I came home from school at the end of the term, and when I got to our place not only had my mother gone but the stairs had gone too. There was no staircase in the house.

We lived in an old crab-coloured cottage, with long windows under the eaves that looked like eyes half-closed against the sun. Now when I got out of the car I saw scaffolding over the front door and two heaps of sand and mortar on the crazy paving, which my father asked me not to tread in because it would “make work for Janey.” (This was the name of his second wife.) I went inside. Imagine my astonishment. The little hall had vanished, the ceiling had gone; you could see up to the roof; the wall on one side had been stripped to the brick, and on the other hung a long curtain of builder’s sheets. “Where are the stairs?” I said. “What have you done with the stairs?” I was at the laughing age.

A mild, trim voice spoke above our heads.

“Ah, I know that laugh,” the voice said sweetly and archly. There was Miss Richards, or I should say my father’s second wife, standing behind a builder’s rope on what used to be the landing, which now stuck out precariously without banisters, like the portion of a ship’s deck. The floor appeared to have been sawn off. She used to be my father’s secretary and I had often seen her in my father’s office; but now she had changed. Her fair hair was fluffed out and she wore a fussed and shiny brown dress that was quite unsuitable for the country.

I remember how odd they both looked, she up above and my father down below, and both apologizing to me. The builders had taken the old staircase out two days before, they said, and had promised to put the new one in against the far wall of the room

behind the dust sheets before I got back from school. But they had not kept their promise.

"We go up," said my father, cutting his wife short, for she was apologizing too much, "by the ladder."

He pointed. At that moment his wife was stepping to the end of the landing where a short ladder, with a post to hold on to at the top as one stepped on the first rung, sloped eight or nine feet to the ground.

"It's horrible," called my step-mother.

My father and I watched her come down. She came to the post and turned round, not sure whether she ought to come down the ladder frontwards or backwards.

"Back," called my father.

"No, the other hand on the post," he said.

My step-mother blushed fondly and gave him a look of fear. She put one foot on the step and then took her foot back and put the other one there and then pouted. It was only eight feet from the ground: at school we climbed half-way up the gym walls on the bars. I remembered her as a quick and practical woman at the office; she was now, I was sure, playing at being weak and dependent.

"My hands," she said, looking at the dust on her fingers as she grasped the top step.

My father and I stopped where we were and watched her. She put one leg out too high, as if, artlessly, to show the leg first. She was a plain woman and her legs (she used to say) were her "nicest thing". This was the only coquetry she had. She looked like one of those insects that try the air around them with their feelers before they move. I was surprised that my father (who had always been so polite and grave-mannered to my mother, and had almost bowed to me when he had met me at the station and helped me in and out of the car) did not go to help her. I saw an expression of obstinacy on his face.

"You're at the bottom," he said. "Only two more steps."

"Oh dear," said my step-mother, at last getting off the last step on to the floor; and she turned with her small chin raised, offering us her helplessness for admiration. She came to me and kissed me and said:

"Doesn't she look lovely? You are growing into a woman."

"Nonsense," said my father. And, in fear of being a woman and yet pleased by what she said, I took my father's arm.

"Is that what we have to do? Is that how we get to bed?" I said.

"It's only until Monday," my father said again.

They both of them looked ashamed, as though by having the stairs removed they had done something foolish. My father tried to conceal this by an air of modest importance. They seemed a very modest couple. Both of them looked shorter to me since their marriage: I was very shocked by this. *She* seemed to have made him shorter. I had always thought of my father as a dark, vain, terse man, very logical and never giving in to anyone. He seemed much less important now his secretary was in the house.

"It is easy," I said, and I went to the ladder and was up it in a moment.

"Mind," called my step-mother.

But in a moment I was down again, laughing. When I was coming down I heard my step-mother say quietly to my father, "What legs! She is growing."

My legs and my laugh: I did not think that my father's secretary had the right to say anything about me. She was not my mother.

After this my father took me round the house. I looked behind me once or twice as I walked. On one of my shoes was some of the sand he had warned me about. I don't know how it got on my shoes. It was funny seeing this one sandy footmark making work for Janey wherever I went.

My father took me through the dust curtains into the dining-room and then to the far wall where the staircase was going to be.

"Why have you done it?" I said.

He and I were alone.

"The house has wanted it for years," he said. "It ought to have been done years ago."

I did not say anything. When my mother was here, she was always complaining about the house, saying it was poky, barbarous—I can hear her voice now saying "barbarous" as if it were the name of some terrifying and savage Queen—and my father had always refused to alter anything. Barbarous: I used to think of that word as my mother's name.

"Does Janey like it?" I said.

My father hardened at this question. He seemed to be saying, "What has it got to do with Janey?" But what he said was—and he spoke with amusement, with a look of quiet scorn:

"She liked it as it was."

"I did too," I said.

I then saw—but no, I did not really understand this at the time; it is something I understand now I am older—that my father was not altering the house for Janey's sake. She hated the whole place because my mother had been there, but was too tired by her earlier life in his office, fifteen years of it, too unsure of herself, to say anything. My father was making an act of amends to my mother. He was punishing Janey by "getting in builders" and making everyone uncomfortable and miserable; he was making an emotional scene with himself. He was annoying Janey with what my mother had so maddeningly wanted and which he would not give her.

After he had shown me the house, I said I would go and see Janey getting lunch ready.

"I shouldn't do that," said my father. "It will delay her. Lunch is just ready."

"Or should be," he said, looking at his watch.

We went to the sitting-room, and while we waited I sat in the green chair and he asked me questions about school and we went on to talk about the holidays. But when I answered I could see he was not listening to me but trying to catch sounds of Janey moving in the kitchen. Occasionally there were sounds: something gave an explosive fizz in a hot pan, and a saucepan lid fell. This made a loud noise and the lid spun a long time on the stone floor. The sound stopped our talk.

"Janey is not used to the kitchen," said my father.

I smiled very close to my lips, I did not want my father to see it, but he looked at me and he smiled by accident too. There was understanding between us.

"I will go and see," I said.

He raised his hand to stop me, but I went.

It was natural. For fifteen years Janey had been my father's secretary. She had worked in an office. I remember when I went there when I was young she used to come into the room with an earnest air, leaning her head a little sideways and turning three-

quarter-face to my father at his desk, leaning forward to guess at what he wanted. I admired the great knowledge she had of his affairs, the way she carried letters, how quickly she picked up the telephone if it rang, the authority of her voice. Her strength was that she had been impersonal. She had lost that strength in her marriage. As his wife, she had no behaviour. When we were talking she raised her low bosom, which had become round and duck-like, with a sigh and smiled at my father with a tentative, expectant fondness. After fifteen years, a life had ended: she was resting.

But Janey had not lost her office behaviour: that she now kept for the kitchen. The moment I went to the kitchen, I saw her walking to the stove where the saucepans were throbbing too hard. She was walking exactly as she had walked towards my father at his desk. The stove had taken my father's place. She went up to it with impersonal enquiry, as if to anticipate what it wanted, she appeared to be offering a pile of plates to be warmed as if they were a pile of letters. She seemed baffled because the stove could not speak. When one of the saucepans boiled over she ran to it and lifted it off, suddenly and too high, with her telephone movement: the water spilled at once. On the table beside the stove were basins and pans she was using, and she had them all spread out in an orderly way like typing; she went from one to the other with the careful look of enquiry she used to give to the things she was filing. It was not a method suitable to work in a kitchen.

When I came in, she put down the pan she was holding and stopped everything—as she would have done in the office—to talk to me about what she was doing. She was very nice about my hair, which I had had cut last term; it made me look older and I liked it better. But blue smoke rose behind her as we talked. She did not notice it.

I went back to my father.

"I didn't want to be in the way," I said.

"Extraordinary," he said, looking at his watch. "I must just go and hurry Janey up."

He was astonished that a woman so brisk in an office should be languid and dependent in a house.

"She is just bringing it in," I said. "The potatoes are ready. They are on the table. I saw them."

"On the table?" he said. "Getting cold?"

"On the kitchen table," I said.

"That doesn't prevent them being cold," he said. My father was a sarcastic man.

I walked about the room humming. My father's exasperation did not last; it gave way to a new thing in his voice. Resignation.

"We will wait if you do not mind," he said to me. "Janey is slow. And by the way," he said, lowering his voice a little, "I shouldn't mention we passed the Leonards in the road when I brought you up from the station."

I was surprised.

"Not the Leonards?" I said.

"They were friends of your mother's," he said. "You are old enough to understand. One has to be sometimes a little tactful. Janey sometimes feels . . ."

I looked at my father. He had altered in many ways. When he gave me this secret his small, brown eyes gave a brilliant flash and I opened my blue eyes very wide to receive it. He had changed. His rough black hair was clipped closer at the ears and he had that too young look which middle-aged men sometimes have, for by certain lines it can be seen that they are not as young as their faces. Marks like the minutes on the face of a clock showed at the corners of his eyes, his nose, his mouth; he was much thinner; his face had hardened. He had often been angry and sarcastic, sulking and abrupt, when my mother was with us; I had never seen him before, as he was now, blank-faced, ironical and set in impatient boredom. After he spoke, he had actually been hissing a tune privately through his teeth at the corner of his mouth. At this moment Janey came in with a smile but without dishes, and said lunch was ready.

"Oh," I laughed when we got into the dining-room. "It is like . . . it is like France."

"France?" they both said together, smiling at me.

"Like when we all went to France before the war and you took the car," I said. I had chosen France because that seemed as far as I could get from the Leonards.

"What on earth are you talking about?" said my father, looking embarrassed. "You were only five before the war."

"I remember every bit of it. You and Mummy on the boat."

"Yes, yes," said my step-mother with melancholy importance. "I got the tickets for you all."

My father looked as though he was going to hit me. Then he gave a tolerant laugh across the table to my step-mother.

"I remember perfectly well," she said. "I'm afraid I couldn't get the peas to boil. Oh, I've forgotten the potatoes."

"Fetch them," my father said to me.

I thought she was going to cry. When I came back, I could see she *had* been crying. She was one of those very fair women in whom even three or four tears bring pink to the nose. My father had said something sharply to her, for his face was shut and hard and she was leaning over the dishes, a spoon in her hand, to conceal a wound.

After lunch I took my case and went up the ladder. It was not easy to go up carrying a suitcase, but I enjoyed it. I wished we could always have a ladder in the house. It was like being on a ship. I stood at the top thinking of my mother leaning on the rail of the ship with her new husband, going to America. I was glad she had gone because, sometimes, she sent me lovely things.

Then I went to my room and I unpacked my case. At the bottom, when I took my pyjamas out—they were the last thing—there was the photograph of my mother face downwards where it had been lying all the term. I forgot to say that I had been in trouble the last week at school. I don't know why. I was longing to be home. I felt I had to *do* something. One afternoon I went into the rooms in our passage when no one was there, and I put the snap of Kitty's father into Mary's room—I took it out of the frame—and I put Mary's brother into Olga's, and I took Maeve's mother and put her into the silver frame where Jessie's mother was: that photograph was too big and I bent the mount all the way down to get it in. Maeve cried and reported me to Miss Compton. "It was only a joke," I said. "A joke in very poor taste," Miss Compton said to me in *her* voice. "How would you like it if anyone took the photograph of your mother?" "I haven't got one," I said. Well, it was not a lie. Everyone wanted to know why I had an empty frame on my chest of drawers. I had punished my mother by leaving her photograph in my trunk.

But now the punishment was over. I took out her picture and put it in the frame on my chest, and every time I bent up from the drawers I looked at her, then at myself in the mirror. In the

middle of this my step-mother came in to ask if she could help me.

"You are getting very pretty," she said. I hated her for admiring me.

I do not deny it: I hated her. She was a foolish woman. She either behaved as if the house, my father and myself were too much hers, or as if she were an outsider. Most of the time she sat there like a visitor, waiting for attention.

I thought to myself: There is my mother, thousands of miles away, leaving us to this and treating us like dirt, and we are left with Miss Richards, of all people.

That night after I had gone to bed I heard my father and my step-mother having a quarrel. "It is perfectly natural," I heard my father say, "for the child to have a photograph of her mother."

A door closed. Someone was wandering about in the passage. When they had gone I opened my door and crept out barefoot to listen. Every step I made seemed to start a loud creak in the boards and I was so concerned with this that I did not notice I had walked to the edge of the landing. The rope was there, but in the dark I could not see it. I knew I was on the edge of the drop into the hall and that with one more step I would have gone through. I went back to my room, feeling sick. And then the thought struck me—and I could not get it out of my head all night; I dreamed it, I tried not to dream it, I turned on the light, but I dreamed it again—that Miss Richards fell over the edge of the landing. I was very glad when the morning came.

The moment I was downstairs I laughed at myself. The drop was only eight or nine feet. Anyone could jump it. I worked out how I would land on my feet if I were to jump there. I moved the ladder, it was not heavy to lift, to see what you would feel like if there was no ladder there and the house was on fire and you had to jump. To make amends for my wicked dreams in the night I saw myself rescuing Miss Richards (I should say my step-mother) as flames teased her to the edge.

My father came out of his room and saw me standing there.

"What are you pulling such faces for?" he said. And he imitated my expressions.

"I was thinking," I said, "of Miss Compton at our school."

He had not foreseen the change in Miss Richards; how she would sit in the house in her best clothes, like a visitor, expectant,

forgetful, stunned by leisure, watchful, wronged and jealous to the point of tears.

Perhaps if the builders had come, as they had promised, on the Monday, my step-mother's story would have been different.

"I am so sorry we are in such a mess," she said to me many times, as if she thought I regarded the ladder as her failure.

"It's fun," I said. "It's like being on a ship."

"You keep on saying that," my step-mother said, looking at me in a very worried way, as if trying to work out the hidden meaning of my remark. "You've never been on a ship."

"To France," I said. "When I was a child."

"Oh yes, you told me," said my step-mother.

Life had become so dull for my father that he liked having the ladder in the house.

"I hate it," said my step-mother to both of us, getting up. It is always surprising when a prosaic person becomes angry.

"Do leave us alone," my father said.

There was a small scene after this. My father did not mean by "us" himself and me, as she chose to think; he was simply speaking of himself, and he had spoken very mildly. My step-mother marched out of the room. Presently we heard her upstairs. She must have been very upset to have faced going up the ladder.

"Come on," said my father. "I suppose there's nothing for it. I'll get the car out. We will go to the builder's."

He called up to her that we were going.

Oh, it was a terrible holiday. When I grew up and was myself married, my father said: "It was a very difficult summer. You didn't realize. You were only a schoolgirl. It was a mistake." And then he corrected himself. I mean that: my father was always making himself more correct: it was his chief vanity that he understood his own behaviour.

"I happened," he said—this was the correction—"to make a very foolish mistake." Whenever he used the phrase "I happened" my father's face seemed to dry up and become distant: he was congratulating himself. Not on the mistake, of course, but on being the first to put his finger on it. "I happen to know . . ., I happen to have seen . . ."—it was this incidental rightness, the footnote of inside knowledge on innumerable minor issues, and his fatal wrongness in a large, obstinate, principled way about

anything important, which, I think, made my beautiful and dishonest mother leave him. She was a tall woman, taller than he, with the eyes of a cat, shrugging her shoulders, curving her long graceful back to be stroked and with a wide, champagne laugh. My father had a clipped-back monkeyish appearance and that faint grin of the boulder one sees in the harder-looking monkeys that are without melancholy or sensibility; this had attracted my mother, but very soon his youthful bounce gave place to a kind of meddling honesty, and she found him dull. And, of course, ruthless. The promptness of his second marriage, perhaps, was to teach her a lesson. I imagine him putting his divorce papers away one evening at his office and realizing, when Miss Richards came in to ask if "there is anything more to-night," that there was a woman who was reliable, trained and, like himself, "happened" to have a lot of inside knowledge.

To get out of the house with my father, to be alone with him: my heart came alive. It seemed to me that this house was not my home any more. If only we could go away, he and I; the country outside seemed to me far more like home than this grotesque divorced house. I stood longing for my step-mother not to answer, dreading that she would come down.

My father was not a man to beg a woman to change her mind. He went out to the garage. My fear of her coming made me stay for a moment. And then (I do not know how the thought came into my head) I went to the ladder and I lifted it away. It was easy to move a short distance, but it began to swing when I tried to put it down. I was afraid it would crash, so I turned it over and over against the other wall, out of reach. Breathlessly, I left the house.

"You have got white on your tunic," said my father as we drove off. "What have you been doing?"

"I rubbed against something," I said.

"Oh, how I love motoring," I laughed beside my father.

"Oh, look at those lovely little rabbits," I said.

"Their little white tails," I laughed.

We passed some hurdles in a field.

"Jumps," I laughed. "I wish I had a pony."

And then my terrible dreams came back to me. I was frightened. I tried to think of something else, but I could not. I could only see my step-mother on the edge of the landing. I could only hear

her giving a scream and going over head first. We got into the town and I felt sick. We arrived at the builder's and my father stopped there. Only a girl was in the office, and I heard my father say in his coldest voice, "I happen to have an appointment . . ."

My father came out, and we drove off. He was cross.

"Where are we going?" I said, when I saw we were not going home.

"To Longwood," he said. "They're working over there." I thought I would faint.

"I—I . . ." I began.

"What?" my father said.

I could not speak. I began to get red and hot. And then I remembered. "I can pray."

It is seven miles to Longwood. My father was a man who enjoyed talking to builders; he planned and replanned with them, built imaginary houses, talked about people. Builders have a large acquaintance with the way people live; my father liked inside knowledge, as I have said. Well, I thought, she is over. She is dead by now. I saw visits to the hospital. I saw my trial.

"She is like you," said the builder, nodding to me. All my life I shall remember his moustache.

"She is like my wife," said my father. "My first wife. I happen to have married again."

(He liked puzzling and embarrassing people.)

"Do you happen to know a tea place near here?" he said.

"Oh no," I said. "I don't feel hungry."

But we had tea at Gilling. The river is across the road from the tea-shop and we stood afterwards on the bridge. I surprised my father by climbing the parapet.

"If you jumped," I said to my father, "would you hurt?"

"You'd break your legs," said my father.

Her "nicest thing"!

I shall not describe our drive back to the house, but my father did say, "Janey will be worried. We've been nearly three hours. I'll put the car in afterwards."

When we got back, he got out quickly and went down the path. I got out slowly. It is a long path leading across a small lawn, then between two lime trees; there are a few steps down where the roses are, and across another piece of grass you are at

the door. I stopped to listen to the bees in the limes, but I could not wait any longer. I went into the house.

There was my step-mother standing on the landing above the hall. Her face was dark red, her eyes were long and violent, her dress was dirty and her hands were black with dust. She had just finished screaming something at my father and her mouth had stayed open after her scream. I thought I could *smell* her anger and her fear the moment I came into the house, but it was really the smell of a burned-out saucepan coming from the kitchen.

"You moved the ladder! Six hours I've been up here. The telephone has been ringing, something has burned on the stove. I might have burned to death. Get me down, get me down. I might have killed myself. Get me down," she cried, and she came to the gap where the ladder ought to have been.

"Don't be silly, Janey," said my father. "I didn't move the ladder. Don't be such a fool. You're still alive."

"Get me down," Janey cried out. "You liar, you liar, you liar. You did move it."

My father lifted the ladder, and as he did so he said:

"The builder must have been."

"No one has been," screamed my step-mother. "I've been alone. Up here!"

"Daddy isn't a liar," I said, taking my father's arm.

"Come down," said my father when he had got the ladder in place. "I'm holding it."

And he went up a step or two towards her.

"No," shrieked Janey, coming to the edge.

"Now, come on. Calm yourself," said my father.

"No, no, I tell you," said Janey.

"All right, you must stay," said my father, and stepped down.

That brought her, of course.

"I moved the ladder," I said when she came down.

"Oh," said Janey, swinging her arm to hit me, but she fainted instead.

That night my father came to my room when I was in bed. I had moved my mother's photograph to the bedside table. He was not angry. He was tired out.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

I did not answer.

"Did you know she was upstairs?" he said.

I did not reply.

"Stop playing with the sheet," he said. "Look at me. Did you know she was upstairs?"

"Yes," I said.

"You little cat," he said.

I smiled.

"It was very wrong," he said.

I smiled. Presently he smiled. I laughed.

"It is nothing to laugh at," he said. And suddenly he could not stop himself: he laughed. The door opened and my step-mother looked in while we were both shaking with laughter. My father laughed as if he were laughing for the first time for many years; his boulderish look, sly and bumptious and so delicious, came back to him. The door closed.

He stopped laughing.

"She might have been killed," he said, severely again.

"No, no, no," I cried, and tears came to my eyes.

He put his arm round me.

My mother was a cat, they said, a wicked woman, leaving us like that. I longed for my mother.

Three days later, I went camping. I apologized to my step-mother and she forgave me. I never saw her again.

Sense of Humour

IT started one Saturday. I was working new ground and I decided I'd stay at the hotel the week-end and put in an appearance at church.

"All alone?" asked the girl in the cash desk.

It had been raining since ten o'clock.

"Mr Good has gone," she said. "And Mr Straker. He usually stays with us. But he's gone."

"That's where they make their mistake," I said. "They think they know everything because they've been on the road all their lives."

"You're a stranger here, aren't you?" she said.

"I am," I said. "And so are you."

"How do you know that?"

"Obvious," I said. "Way you speak."

"Let's have a light," she said.

"So's I can see you," I said.

That was how it started. The rain was pouring down on to the glass roof of the office.

She'd a cup of tea steaming on the register. I said I'd have one too. "What's it going to be and I'll tell them," she said, but I said just a cup of tea.

"I'm T.T.," I said. "Too many soakers on the road as it is."

I was staying there the week-end so as to be sharp on the job on Monday morning. What's more, it pays in these small towns to turn up at church on Sundays, Presbyterians in the morning, Methodists in the evening. Say "Good morning" and "Good evening" to them. "Ah!" they say. "Church-goer! Pleased to see that! T.T., too." Makes them have a second look at your lines in the morning. "Did you like our service, Mister—er—er?"

"Humphrey's my name." "Mr Humphrey." See? It pays. "Come into the office, Mr Humphrey," she said, bringing me a cup. "Listen to that rain."

I went inside.

"Sugar?" she said.

"Three," I said. We settled to a very pleasant chat. She told me all about herself, and we got on next to families.

"My father was on the railway," she said.

"The engine gave a squeal," I said. "The driver took out his pocket-knife and scraped him off the wheel."

"That's it," she said. "And what is your father's business? You said he had a business."

"Undertaker," I said.

"Undertaker?" she said.

"Why not?" I said. "Good business. Seasonable like everything else. High-class undertaker," I said.

She was looking at me, all the time wondering what to say, and suddenly she went into fits of laughter.

"Undertaker," she said, covering her face with her hands, and went on laughing.

"Here," I said. "What's up?"

"Undertaker!" she laughed and laughed. Struck me as being a pretty thin joke.

"Don't mind me," she said. "I'm Irish."

"Oh, I see," I said. "That's it, is it? Got a sense of humour."

Then the bell rang and a woman called out "Muriel! Muriel!" and there was a motor bike making a row at the front door.

"All right," the girl called out. "Excuse me a moment, Mr Humphrey," she said. "Don't think me rude. That's my boy friend. He wants the bird turning up like this."

She went out, but there was her boy friend looking over the window ledge into the office. He had come in. He had a cape on, soaked with rain, and the rain was in beads in his hair. It was fair hair. It stood up on end. He'd been economizing on the brilliantine. He didn't wear a hat. He gave me a look, and I gave him a look. I didn't like the look of him. And he didn't like the look of me. A smell of oil and petrol and rain and mackintosh came off him. He had a big mouth with thick lips. They were very red. I recognized him at once as the son of the man who ran the Kounty Garage. I saw this chap when I put my car away. The firm's car. A lock-up, because of the samples. Took me ten minutes to ram the idea into his head. He looked as though he'd never heard of samples. Slow—you know the way they are in the provinces. Slow on the job.

"Oh, Colin," says she. "What do you want?"

"Nothing," the chap said. "I came in to see you."

"To see me?"

"Just to see you."

"You came in this morning."

"That's right," he said. He went red. "You was busy," he said.

"Well, I'm busy now," she said.

He bit his tongue, and licked his big lips over and took a look at me. Then he started grinning.

"I got the new bike, Muriel," he said. "I've got it outside."

"It's just come down from the works," he said.

"The laddie wants you to look at his bike," I said. So she went out and had a look at it.

When she came back she had got rid of him.

"Listen to that rain," she said.

"Lord, I'm fed up with this line," she said.

"What line?" I said. "The hotel line?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm fed right up to the back teeth with it."

"And you've got good teeth," I said.

"There's not the class of person there used to be in it," she said.

"All our family have got good teeth."

"Not the class?"

"I've been in it five years and there's not the same class at all. You never meet any fellows."

"Well," said I. "If they're like that half-wit at the garage, they're nothing to be struck on. And you've met me."

I said it to her like that.

"Oh," says she. "It isn't as bad as that yet."

It was cold in the office. She used to sit all day in her overcoat. She was a smart girl with a big friendly chin and a second one coming, and her forehead and nose were covered with freckles. She had copper-coloured hair too. She got her shoes through the trade from Duke's traveller and her clothes, too, off the Hollenborough mantle man. I told her I could do her better stockings than the ones she'd got on. She got a good reduction on everything. Twenty-five or thirty-three and a third. She had her expenses cut right back. I took her to the pictures that night in the car. I made Colin get the car out for me.

"That boy wanted me to go on the back of his bike. On a night like this," she said.

"Oh," she said, when we got to the pictures. "Two shillings's too much. Let's go into the one-and-sixes at the side and we can nip across into the two-shillings when the lights go down."

"Fancy your father being an undertaker," she said in the middle of the show. And she started laughing as she had laughed before.

She had her head screwed on all right. She said:

"Some girls have no pride once the lights go down."

Every time I went to that town I took a box of something. Samples, mostly, they didn't cost me anything.

"Don't thank me," I said. "Thank the firm."

Every time I took her out I pulled the blinds in the back seat of the car to hide the samples. That chap Colin used to give us oil and petrol. He used to give me a funny look. Fishy sort of small eyes he'd got. Always looking miserable. Then we would go off. Sunday was her free day. Not that driving's any holiday for me. And, of course, the firm paid. She used to take me down to see her family for the day. Start in the morning, and taking it you had dinner and tea there, a day's outing cost us nothing. Her father was something on the railway, retired. He had a long stocking, somewhere, but her sister, the one that was married, had had her share already.

He had a tumour after his wife died and they just played upon the old man's feelings. It wasn't right. She wouldn't go near her sister, and I don't blame her, taking the money like that. Just played upon the old man's feelings.

Every time I was up there Colin used to come in looking for her.

"Oh, Colin," I used to say. "Done my car yet?" He knew where he got off with me.

"Not now, I can't, Colin. I tell you I'm going out with Mr Humphrey," she used to say to him. I heard her.

"He keeps on badgering me," she said to me.

"You leave him to me," I said.

"No, he's all right," she said.

"You let me know if there's any trouble with Colin," I said.

"Seems to be a harum-scarum sort of half-wit to me," I said.

"And he spends every penny he makes," she said.

Well, we know that sort of thing is all right while it lasts, I told her, but the trouble is that it doesn't last.

We were always meeting Colin on the road. I took no notice of it first of all and then I grew suspicious and awkward at always meeting him. He had a new motor bicycle. It was an Indian, a scarlet thing that he used to fly over the moor with,

flat out. Muriel and I used to go out over the moor to Ingley Wood in the firm's Morris—I had a customer out that way.

"May as well do a bit of business while you're about it," I said.

"About what?" she said.

"Ah ha!" I said.

"That's what Colin wants to know," I said.

Sure enough, coming back we'd hear him popping and back-firing close behind us, and I'd put out my hand to stop him and keep him following us, biting our dirt.

"I see his little game," I said. "Following us."

So I saw to it that he did follow. We could hear him banging away behind us, and the traffic is thick on the Ingley road in the afternoon.

"Oh, let him pass," Muriel said. "I can't stand those dirty things banging in my ears."

I waved him on and past he flew with his scarf flying out, blazing red into the traffic. "We're doing 58 ourselves," she said, leaning across to look.

"Powerful buses those," I said. "Any fool can do it if he's got the power. Watch me step on it."

But we did not catch Colin. Half an hour later he passed us coming back. Cut right in between us and a lorry—I had to brake hard. I damn nearly killed him. His ears were red with the wind. He didn't wear a hat. I got after him as soon as I could, but I couldn't touch him.

Nearly every week-end I was in that town seeing my girl, that fellow was hanging around. He came into the bar on Saturday nights, he poked his head into the office on Sunday mornings. It was a sure bet that if we went out in the car he would pass us on the road. Every time we would hear that scarlet thing roar by like a horse-stinger. It didn't matter where we were. He passed us on the main road, he met us down the side roads. There was a little cliff under oak trees at May Ponds, she said, where the view was pretty. And there, soon after we got there, was Colin on the other side of the water, watching us. Once we found him sitting on his bike, just as though he were waiting for us.

"You been here in a car?" I said.

"No, motor bike," she said and blushed. "Cars can't follow in these tracks."

She knew a lot of places in that country. Some of the roads

weren't roads at all and were bad for tyres and I didn't want the firm's car scratched by bushes, but you would have thought Colin could read what was in her mind. For nine times out of ten he was there. The bike got on my nerves. It was a red, roaring, powerful thing and he opened it full out.

"I'm going to speak to Colin," I said. "I won't have him annoying you."

"He's not annoying me," she said. "I've got a sense of humour."

"Here, Colin," I said one evening when I put the car away. "What's the idea?"

He was taking off his overalls. He pretended he did not know what I was talking about. He had a way of rolling his eyeballs, as if they had got wet and loose in his head, while he was speaking to me, and you never knew if it was sweat or oil on his face. It was always pale, with high colour on his cheeks and very red lips.

"Miss MacFarlane doesn't like being followed," I said.

He dropped his jaw and gaped at me. I could not tell whether he was being very surprised or very sly. I used to call him "Marbles", because when he spoke he seemed to have a lot of marbles in his mouth.

Then he said he never went to the places we went to, except by accident. He wasn't following us, he said, but we were following him. We never let him alone, he said. Everywhere he went, he said, we were there. Take last Saturday, he said, we were following him for miles down the by-pass, he said. But you passed us first and then sat down in front, I said. I went to Ingley Wood, he said. And you followed me there. No, we didn't, I said, Miss MacFarlane decided to go there.

He said he did not want to complain, but fair was fair. I suppose you know, he said, that you have taken my girl off me. Well, you can leave *me* alone, can't you?

"Here," I said. "One minute! Not so fast! You said I've taken Miss MacFarlane from you. Well, she was never your girl. She only knew you in a friendly way."

"She was my girl," was all he said.

He was pouring oil into my engine. He had some cotton-wool in one hand and the can in the other. He wiped up the green oil that had overflowed, screwed on the cap, pulled down the bonnet and whistled to himself.

I went back to Muriel and told her what Colin had said.

"I don't like trouble," I said.

"Don't you worry," she said. "I had to have someone to go to all these places with before you came. Couldn't stick in here all day Sunday."

"Ah," I said. "That's it, is it? You've been to all these places with him?"

"Yes," she said. "And he keeps on going to them. He's sloppy about me."

"Good God," I said. "Sentimental memories."

I felt sorry for that fellow. He knew it was hopeless, but he loved her. I suppose he couldn't help himself. Well, it takes all sorts to make a world, as my old mother used to say. If we were all alike it wouldn't do. Some men can't save money. It just runs through their fingers. He couldn't save money, so he lost her. I suppose all he thought of was love.

I could have been friends with that fellow. As it was I put a lot of business his way. I didn't want him to get the wrong idea about me. We're all human after all.

We didn't have any more trouble with Colin after this until Bank Holiday. I was going to take her down to see my family. The old man's getting a bit past it now and has given up living over the shop. He's living out on the Barnum Road, beyond the tram stop. We were going down in the firm's car, as per usual, but something went wrong with the mag. and Colin had not got it right for the holiday. I was wild about this. What's the use of a garage who can't do a rush job for the holidays! What's the use of being an old customer if they're going to let you down! I went for Colin bald-headed.

"You knew I wanted it," I said. "It's no use trying to put me off with a tale about the stuff not coming down from the works. I've heard that one before."

I told him he'd got to let me have another car, because he'd let me down. I told him I wouldn't pay his account. I said I'd take my business away from him. But there wasn't a car to be had in the town because of the holiday. I could have knocked the fellow down. After the way I'd sent business to him.

Then I saw through his little game. He knew Muriel and I were going to my people, and he had done this to stop it. The moment I saw this I let him know that it would take more than him to stop me doing what I wanted.

I said:

"Right. I shall take the amount of Miss MacFarlane's train-fare and my own from the account at the end of the month."

I said:

"You may run a garage, but you don't run the railway service."

I was damned angry going by train. I felt quite lost on the railway after having a car. It was crowded with trippers too. It was slow—stopping at all the stations. The people come in, they tread all over your feet, they make you squeeze up till you're crammed against the window, and the women stick out their elbows and fidget. And then the expense! A return for two runs you into just over a couple of quid. I could have murdered Colin.

We got there at last. We walked up from the tram stop. Mother was at the window and let us in.

"This is Miss MacFarlane," I said.

And mother said:

"Oh, pleased to meet you. We've heard a lot about you."

"Oh," mother said to me, giving me a kiss. "Are you tired? You haven't had your tea, have you? Sit down. Have this chair, dear. It's more comfortable."

"Well, my boy," my father said.

"Want a wash?" my father said. "We've got a wash-basin downstairs," he said. "I used not to mind about washing upstairs before. Now I couldn't do without it. Funny how your ideas change as you get older."

"How's business?" he said.

"Mustn't grumble," I said. "How's yours?"

"You knew," he said, "we took off the horses: except for one or two of the older families we have got motors now."

But he'd told me that the last time I was there. I'd been at him for years about motor hearses.

"You've forgotten I used to drive them," I said.

"Bless me, so you did," he said.

He took me up to my room. He showed me everything he had done to the house. "Your mother likes it," he said. "The traffic's company for her. You know what your mother is for company."

Then he gives me a funny look.

"Who's the girl?" he says.

My mother came in then and said:

"She's pretty, Arthur."

"Of course she's pretty," I said. "She's Irish."

"Oh," said the old man. "Irish! Got a sense of humour, eh?"

"She wouldn't be marrying me if she hadn't," I said. And then I gave *them* a look.

"Marrying her, did you say?" exclaimed my father.

"Any objection?" I said.

"Now, Ernest dear," said my mother. "Leave the boy alone. Come down while I pop the kettle on."

She was terribly excited.

"Miss MacFarlane," the old man said.

"No sugar, thank you, Mrs Humphrey. I beg your pardon, Mr Humphrey."

"The Glen Hotel at Swansea, I don't suppose you know that?" my father said.

"I wondered if you did, being in the catering line."

"It doesn't follow she knows every hotel," my mother said.

"Forty years ago," the old man said. "I was staying at the Glen in Swansea and the head waiter . . ."

"Oh no, not that one. I'm sure Miss MacFarlane doesn't want to hear that one," my mother said.

"How's business with you, Mr Humphrey?" said Muriel. "We passed a large cemetery near the station."

"Dad's ledger," I said.

"The whole business has changed so that you wouldn't know it, in my lifetime," said my father. "Silver fittings have gone clean out. Everyone wants simplicity nowadays. Restraint. Dignity," my father said.

"Prices did it," my father said.

"The war," he said.

"You couldn't get the wood," he said.

"Take ordinary mahogany, just an ordinary piece of mahogany. Or teak," he said. "Take teak. Or walnut."

"You can certainly see the world go by in this room," I said to my mother.

"It never stops," she said.

Now it was all bicycles over the new concrete road from the gun factory. Then traction engines and cars. They came up over the hill where the A.A. man stands and choked up round the tram

stop. It was mostly holiday traffic. Everything with a wheel on it was out.

"On this stretch," my father told me, "they get three accidents a week." There was an ambulance station at the cross-roads.

We had hardly finished talking about this, in fact the old man was still saying that something ought to be done, when the telephone rang.

"Name of MacFarlane?" the voice said on the wire.

"No. Humphrey," my father said. "There is a Miss MacFarlane here."

"There's a man named Colin Mitchell lying seriously injured in an accident at the Cottage Hospital, gave me the name of MacFarlane as his nearest relative."

That was the police. On to it at once. That fellow Colin had followed us down by road.

Cry, I never heard a girl cry as Muriel cried when we came back from the hospital. He had died in the ambulance. Cutting in, the old game he used to play on me. Clean off the saddle and under the Birmingham bus. The blood was everywhere, they said. People were still looking at it when we went by. Head on. What a mess! Don't let's talk about it.

She wanted to see him, but they said "No." There wasn't anything recognizable to see. She put her arms round my neck and cried "Colin, Colin" as if I were Colin and clung to me. I was feeling sick myself. I held her tight and I kissed her and I thought 'Holiday ruined.'

'Damn fool man,' I thought. 'Poor devil,' I thought.

"I knew he'd do something like this."

"There, there," I said to her. "Don't think about Colin."

Didn't she love me, I said, and not Colin. Hadn't she got me? She said, yes, she had. And she loved me. But, "Oh, Colin! Oh, Colin!" she cried. "And Colin's mother," she cried. "Oh, it's terrible." She cried and cried.

We put her to bed and I sat with her and my mother kept coming in.

"Leave her to me," I said. "I understand her."

Before they went to bed they both came in and looked at her. She lay sobbing with her head in the pillow.

I could quite understand her being upset. Colin was a decent fellow. He was always doing things for her. He mended her electric

lamp and he riveted the stem of a wine-glass so that you couldn't see the break. He used to make things for her. He was very good with his hands.

She lay on her side with her face burning and feverish with misery and crying, scalded by the salt, and her lips shrivelled up. I put my arm under her neck and I stroked her forehead. She groaned. Sometimes she shivered and sometimes she clung to me, crying, "Oh, Colin! Colin!"

My arm ached with the cramp and I had a crick in my back, sitting in the awkward way I was on the bed. It was late. There was nothing to do but to ache and sit watching her and thinking. It is funny the way your mind drifts. When I was kissing her and watching her I was thinking out who I'd show our new autumn range to first. Her hand held my wrist tight and when I kissed her I got her tears on my lips. They burned and stung. Her neck and shoulders were soft and I could feel her breath hot out of her nostrils on the back of my hand. Ever noticed how hot a woman's breath gets when she's crying? I drew out my hand and lay down beside her and "Oh, Colin, Colin" she sobbed, turning over and clinging to me. And so I lay there, listening to the traffic, staring at the ceiling and shivering whenever the picture of Colin shooting right off that damned red thing into the bus came into my mind—until I did not hear the traffic any more, or see the ceiling any more, or think any more, but a change happened—I don't know when. This Colin thing seemed to have knocked the bottom out of everything and I had a funny feeling we were going down and down and down in a lift. And the farther we went the hotter and softer she got. Perhaps it was when I found with my hands that she had very big breasts. But it was like being on the mail steamer and feeling engines start under your feet, thumping louder and louder. You can feel it in every vein of your body. Her mouth opened and her tears dried. Her breath came through her open mouth and her voice was blind and husky. Colin, Colin, Colin, she said, and her fingers were hooked into me. I got out and turned the key in the door.

In the morning I left her sleeping. It did not matter to me what my father might have heard in the night, but still I wondered. She would hardly let me touch her before that. I told her I was sorry, but she shut me up. I was afraid of her. I was afraid of mentioning Colin. I wanted to go out of the house there and then

and tell someone everything. Did she love Colin all the time? Did she think I was Colin? And every time I thought of that poor devil covered over with a white sheet in the hospital mortuary, a kind of picture of her and me under the sheets with love came into my mind. I couldn't separate the two things. Just as though it had all come from Colin.

I'd rather not talk any more about that. I never talked to Muriel about it. I waited for her to say something, but she didn't. She didn't say a word.

The next day was a bad day. It was grey and hot and the air smelled of oil fumes from the road. There's always a mess to clear up when things like this happen. I had to see to it. I had the job of ringing up the boy's mother. But I got round that, thank God, by ringing up the garage and getting them to go round and see the old lady. My father is useless when things are like this. I was the whole morning on the phone: to the hospital, the police, the coroner—and he stood fussing beside me, jerking up and down like a fat india-rubber ball. I found my mother washing up at the sink and she said:

"That poor boy's mother! I can't stop thinking of her." Then my father comes in and says—just as though I was a customer:

"Of course, if Mrs Mitchell desires it, we can have the remains of the deceased conveyed to his house by one of our new specially sprung motor hearses and can, if necessary, make all the funeral arrangements."

I could have hit him, because Muriel came into the room when he was saying this. But she stood there as if nothing had happened.

"It's the least we can do for poor Mrs Mitchell," she said. There were small creases of shadow under her eyes, which shone with a soft strong light I had never seen before. She walked as if she were really still in that room with me, asleep. God, I loved that girl! God, I wanted to get all this over, this damned Colin business that had come right into the middle of everything like this, and I wanted to get married right away. I wanted to be alone with her. That's what Colin did for me.

"Yes," I said. "We must do the right thing by Colin."

"We are sometimes asked for long-distance estimates," my father said.

"It will be a little something," my mother said.

"Dad and I will talk it over," I said.

"Come into the office," my father said. "It occurred to me that it would be nice to do the right thing by this friend of yours."

We talked it over. We went into the cost of it. There was the return journey to reckon. We worked it out that it would come no dearer to old Mrs Mitchell than if she took the train and buried the boy here. That is to say, my father said, if I drove it.

"It would look nice," my father said.

"Saves money and it would look a bit friendly," my father said. "You've done it before."

"Well," I said. "I suppose I can get a refund on my return ticket from the railway."

But it was not as simple as it looked, because Muriel wanted to come. She wanted to drive back with me in the hearse. My mother was very worried about this. It might upset Muriel, she thought. Father thought it might not look nice to see a young girl sitting by the coffin of a grown man.

"It must be dignified," my father said. "You see, if she was there it might look as though she were just doing it for the ride—like these young women on bakers' vans."

My father took me out into the hall to tell me this because he did not want her to hear. But she would not have it. She wanted to come back with Colin.

"Colin loved me. It is my duty to him," she said. "Besides," she said, suddenly, in her full open voice—it had seemed to be closed and carved and broken and small—"I've never been in a hearse before."

"And it will save her fare too," I said to my father.

That night I went again to her room. She was awake. I said I was sorry to disturb her, but I would go at once only I wanted to see if she was all right. She said, in the closed voice again, that she was all right.

"Are you sure?" I said.

She did not answer. I was worried. I went over to the bed.

"What is the matter? Tell me what is the matter," I said.

For a long time she was silent. I held her hand, I stroked her head. She was lying stiff in the bed. She would not answer. I dropped my hand to her small white shoulder. She stirred and drew up her legs and half turned and said, "I was thinking of Colin."

"Where is he?" she asked.

"They've brought him round. He's lying downstairs."

"In the front room?"

"Yes, ready for the morning. Now, be a sensible girl and go back by train."

"No, no," she said. "I want to go with Colin. Poor Colin. He loved me and I didn't love him." And she drew my hands down to her breasts.

"Colin loved me," she whispered.

"Not like this," I whispered.

It was a warm grey morning like all the others when we took Colin back. They had fixed the coffin in before Muriel came out. She came down wearing the bright blue hat she had got off Dormer's millinery man and she kissed my mother and father good-bye. They were very sorry for her. "Look after her, Arthur," my mother said. Muriel got in beside me without a glance behind her at the coffin. I started the engine. They smiled at us. My father raised his hat, but whether it was to Muriel and me or to Colin, or to the three of us, I do not know. He was not, you see, wearing his top-hat. I'll say this for the old boy, thirty years in the trade have taught him tact.

After leaving my father's house you have to go down to the tram terminus before you get on to the by-pass. There were always one or two drivers, conductors or inspectors there, doing up their tickets, or changing over the trolley arms. When we passed I saw two of them drop their jaws, stick their pencils in their ears and raise their hats. I was so surprised by this that I nearly raised mine in acknowledgment, forgetting that we had the coffin behind. I had not driven one of my father's hearses for years.

Hearses are funny things to drive. They are well-sprung, smooth-running cars, with quiet engines, and, if you are used to driving a smaller car, before you know where you are you are speeding. You know you ought to go slow, say 25 to 30 maximum, and it's hard to keep it down. You can return empty at 70 if you like. It's like driving a fire-engine. Go fast out and come back slow—only the other way round. Open out in the country but slow down past houses. That's what it means. My father was very particular about this.

Muriel and I didn't speak very much at first. We sat listening to the engine and the occasional jerk of the coffin behind when we went over a pot-hole. We passed the place where poor Colin—

but I didn't say anything to Muriel, and she, if she noticed—which I doubt—did not say anything to me. We went through Cox Hill, Wammering and Yodley Mount, flat country, don't care for it myself. "There's a wonderful lot of building going on," Muriel said at last.

"You won't know these places in five years," I said.

But my mind kept drifting away from the road and the green fields and the dullness, and back to Colin—five days before, he had come down this way. I expected to see that Indian coming flying straight out of every corner. But it was all bent and bust up properly now. I saw the damned thing.

He had been up to his old game, following us, and that had put the end to following. But not quite; he was following us now, behind us in the coffin. Then my mind drifted off that and I thought of those nights at my parents' house, and Muriel. You never know what a woman is going to be like. I thought, too, that it had put my calculations out. I mean, supposing she had a baby. You see, I had reckoned on waiting eighteen months or so. I would have eight hundred then. But if we had to get married at once, we should have to cut right down. Then I kept thinking it was funny her saying "Colin!" like that in the night; it was funny it made her feel that way with me, and how it made me feel when she called me Colin. I'd never thought of her in that way, in what you might call the "Colin" way.

I looked at her and she looked at me and she smiled, but still we did not say very much, but the smiles kept coming to both of us. The light-railway bridge at Dootheby took me by surprise and I thought the coffin gave a jump as we took it.

Colin's still watching us, I nearly said.

There were tears in her eyes.

"What was the matter with Colin?" I said. "Nice chap, I thought. Why didn't you marry him?"

"Yes," she said. "He was a nice boy. But he'd no sense of humour."

"And I wanted to get out of that town," she said.

"I'm not going to stay there, at that hotel," she said.

"I want to get away," she said. "I've had enough."

She had a way of getting angry with the air, like that. "You've got to take me away," she said. We were passing slowly into Muster, there was a tram ahead and people thick on the narrow

pavements, dodging out into the road. But when we got into the Market Square where they were standing around, they saw the coffin. They began to raise their hats. Suddenly she laughed. "It's like being the King and Queen," she said.

"They're raising their hats," she said.

"Not all of them," I said.

She squeezed my hand and I had to keep her from jumping about like a child on the seat as we went through.

"There they go."

"Boys always do," I said.

"And another."

"Let's see what the policeman does."

She started to laugh, but I shut her up. "Keep your sense of humour to yourself," I said.

Through all those towns that run into one another as you might say, we caught it. We went through, as she said, like royalty. So many years since I drove a hearse, I'd forgotten what it was like.

I was proud of her, I was proud of Colin and I was proud of myself. And, after what had happened, I mean on the last two nights, it was like a wedding. And although we knew it was for Colin, it was for us too, because Colin was with both of us. It was like this all the way.

"Look at that man there. Why doesn't he raise his hat? People ought to show respect for the dead," she said.

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